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DEAR ولدي SON

A FILM BY MOHAMED BEN ATTIA



DEAR SON (WELDI)

A film by Mohamed Ben Attia
2018, 100 minutes, Tunisia, Belgium, France, Qatar
Color - 2:35 Scope - 5.1 - Tunisian Arabic w/ English subtitles

Synopsis

Riadh is about to retire from his work as a forklift operator at the port of Tunis. The life he shares with his wife Nazli revolves around their only son Sami, who is preparing for his high school exams. The boy's repeated migraine attacks are a cause of much worry to his parents. But when he finally seems to be getting better, Sami suddenly disappears...

Cast

Mohamed Dhrif, Mouna Mejri, Zakaria Ben Ayed, Imen Cherif, Taylan Mintas, Tarik Copty

Crew

Director: Mohamed Ben Attia

Scriptwriter: Mohamed Ben Attia

DOP: Frédéric Noirhomme

Editor: Nadia Ben Rachid

Music: Omar Aloulou

Sound: Ludovic Escallier, Valérie Ledocte, Jean-Stéphane Garbe

First AD: Caroline Tambour

Production design: Fatma Madani

Line producer: Lina Chaabane, Delphine Tomson

Producers: Dora Bouchoucha, Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, Nadim Cheikhrouha

Production: Nomadis Images, Les Films du Fleuve, Tanit Films

International sales: Luxbox

French distribution: BAC Films





Mohamed Ben Attia Interview

What was the starting point for Dear Son (Weldi) ?

It was before shooting my first film Hedi. At the time, accounts of parents going to look for their children who had joined ISIS were beginning to spread on the radio, on television, in the papers. Sadly, it had become almost commonplace. One day, in my car, I heard a father telling his story on our national French language radio station. I don't know how to explain it, but what he said really affected me. He kept repeating, "my son". He was extremely precise and factual. He spoke about the airport, the plane, Turkey, the border, Syria, and so on. What moved me most was that he spoke of his journey in a way that was devoid of all pathos. He was always in the middle of the action, giving details, facts, dates... I wanted to use his story as inspiration. I quickly realized that what interested me most were not the reasons that compelled the son to leave, but the point of view of those stayed behind: his parents who hadn't seen it coming. I wanted to link their reactions to our local experience, our daily life, the misery we live in – not just economic misery – but also emotional, sexual, and spiritual misery. Gradually, after five or six months, I ended up telling the rest of their story. In other words, their work, their relationship, their emotional states, the search for happiness. That is, if one can speak of happiness in this context.

What was the most difficult part of the writing process?

The most difficult thing was trying not to fall into predictable Manichaeism: to remain subtle and delicate. I wanted to avoid the obvious option of an immediate condemnation, even though it's completely legitimate. I wanted to go beyond the surface level of hatred, of anger, even though, once again, it's completely understandable to feel that way. I remember something my Belgian first assistant said: "In Belgium, everyone knows someone who was close to a victim of a terrorist attack, if not a victim directly." Well, in Tunisia, everyone knows someone who has either left for Syria or whose loved ones have left for Syria. That's the point of view that was for me interesting and even troubling to explore and develop. There have been quite a few films on this topic in which the condemnations were a bit too one-sided and tended to reduce the topic to a systemic issue. Poverty or religious indoctrination were blamed and so on. Yet, when you take a closer look, it quickly becomes obvious that things are much more complex and that the profiles of those who go are so varied that it's impossible to find a common thread. Entire families have gone, from unemployed people to doctors. In the apartment where we shot the film, which belongs to a middle-class family, two had gone, and in the whole residence, six – including the local hottie, a football player who left with his brother - had gone.

The strength of the film lies in the fact that you don't try to explain the reasons that compelled the son to go, and adopt the point of view of those who are left behind. You make the father the central character of the film. Like Hedi, he's an ordinary character whose world is torn apart by external forces, and who will end up changing his way of life completely ...

Exactly. For Riadh, at his age, the key to happiness is simple: looking after his family, going to work every day, earning his daily bread. It's what keeps him going. This is also the life that he imagines for his son: a good job, a wife, children – a “normal” life. He defines himself both through his status as a father and through his job. Then everything collapses: he stops working because he has reached retirement age, and his son disappears. His life is in a state of upheaval. He decides to go in search of his son to bring him home. This leads him to a realization and a level of maturity, which, admittedly, he acquires late. He's over 60, retired, but what has he ever really achieved? And what does the future hold for today's young people? If he finds his son, what are the projects he can draw to convince him to come back? That's what seemed important for me to deal with through the character of the father. The revelation he has about himself, about his own life, his condition as a retiree, as a father, and a husband.

In this process of his awareness, there is that critical meeting with the old Turkish man who, when the father tells him that all he wants is his son's happiness, replies: "That's what we all say, but in the end it's our own happiness we care about..."

Absolutely. It's also this notion of happiness that I felt was linked to ISIS in a troubling way. Even for a teenager who has a fairly stable life, a loving family and is growing up in a healthy and completely normal environment, there is always strong pressure: to do well at school, to succeed in life, to find a job, to start a family – and he is told that this is happiness. Yet, on the other hand, ISIS tells these young people between 18 and 25 precisely that there is no such thing as happiness: that it is a false notion used to indoctrinate them differently, and that life is not actually supposed to be a quest for happiness. Sadly, to some of these young people, this message comes as a kind of relief. It's this clash of conflicting messages that interests me.

The mother and the father react to their son's departure in completely different ways...

Often our mothers have no other choice than to be strong, to make choices and decisions for everyone, to manage life's daily struggles, the finances... This does not leave them room to maneuver, or time to take a step back, to see things in gray rather than in black or white. But the mother in the film does evolve over time. And once she realizes that she has lost her son, she cannot define herself in any other way than through that loss.

When the father is searching for his son and says, "maybe he's dead," the response is, "If he had died, they would have informed you." Does it really happen like that? Did you do any research?

Yes, I did a lot of research, and yes, that's how it works. The father I heard talking on the radio – the one I found so moving – had



received a letter informing him of the death of his son. There's no "rule", per se. But no matter what means they choose, ISIS always informs the family. Because for ISIS, if a young man dies, he has become a martyr, which means he has accomplished great acts of valor. It's almost a source of pride, of glory, so there's no reason not to boast about it.

It is linked to what the old Turkish man says: "They want to feel important, even if they have to die for it."

Exactly; they're prepared to do whatever it takes. Especially if they're a bit vulnerable to begin with.

Where did the idea of the son's migraines come from?

From my own migraines!! [Laughs] The cause of which remains unknown. Your loved ones worry, they want to know what's wrong; they want to understand; but it is what it is – inexplicable. What I liked was creating a parallel with his impending departure. We don't know why he left; that's how it is and that's that. You can turn it around in your head as long as you like, but you'll never get to the bottom of it.

The actors, who are amazing, are really part of the strength and authenticity the film exudes. How did you find the cast?

I was admittedly very lucky. I found the father and the son, Riadh and Sami, on the first day of auditions! When my casting director read the script, he immediately thought of Mohamed Dhrif for the father, Dhrif had played a small part in Man of Ashes by Nouri Bouzid in 1986, and he had also featured in an old police series 30 years ago. I knew straight away that he was perfect for the part. He has this kindness, this humanity, which is the essence of the character. And

during filming he was astonishingly open and warm. He put complete faith in me, especially because he was afraid of underplaying the role, whereas I found that the less he tried to "act", the better he was at it, and the more touching his performance. The day I met him, the casting director had asked a young man to come along, just to give the cue to Mohamed Dhrif. By the end of this audition, I knew he would play the son. His name is Zakaria Ben Ayed; he's a musician: he plays the guitar, writes music, sings, and has been in 3 or 4 commercials.

The choice of the mother was even more amazing. In real life, Mouna Mejri is the mother of Majd Mastoura, the lead actor in Hedi. And he was the one who suggested that I try her for the part. When I spoke to him about Nazli in Dear Son (Weldi), he said: "You should talk to my mother, I think she's got a lot in common with your character, and not just that they are both Arabic teachers." But she took some convincing, because she's a million miles away from the world of cinema, constructing characters, playing parts, and so on.

What about Sameh, the father's colleague at work?

That's the part I took the most time to decide about. Early on, my producer, Dora Bouchoucha, suggested that I audition Imen Cherif. But Imen isn't an actress; she's a Tunisian pop star, and my gut reaction was that it was a bad idea. But Dora insisted, and in the end, she was right – as soon as I met Imen, I saw that she was so different from how I'd thought she would be, and I wanted to call her back. In the meantime, I auditioned many other people. In the end, Imen came through as the obvious choice for the role, and she did an incredible job.

What about the old Turkish man we were talking about earlier?

He's not Turkish, he's Palestinian. His name is Tarik Copty. It was my line producer Lina Chaabane who thought of him. We'd seen him in quite a few films: The Syrian Bride, Lemon Tree. On the other hand, the actor who plays the people-smuggler is a real Turk. It was hard to find an actor in Turkey who matched what I had in mind. I got so frustrated that I ended up just Googling "typical Turk", and that's how I found Taylan Mintas. I really liked his face and the look in his eyes. Here again, luck was on my side, because it turned out that Mintas was a friend of our line producer in Turkey Cigdem Mater. She actually tried to dissuade me from taking him on because he isn't an actor – he's a documentary filmmaker. For me, though, that played in his favor.

How did you go about working with people who, apart from Mohamed Dhrif and Tarik Copty, were all new to acting?

Except for Mohamed, who, I think, went to drama school, and Tarik Copty, they were practically all at the same level. First, I spent a long time talking to them about the film. After that, we rehearsed a lot. For weeks and weeks. I had to teach Mouna, who played the mother, how to use her voice and steady her gaze. I gave her lots of examples and showed her films like Winter Sleep and Climates by Nuri Bilge Ceylan, and that was what helped her most. We also spent a long time on translation – I wanted almost everyone to translate their lines in their own words (I'm always scared that I'll only hear one voice in the film, that of the screenwriter who translated his own script). And then a month before filming started, the apartment where we were going to shoot became available, so we moved in to continue working. My director of photography Frédéric Noirhomme

and I had decided to shoot in long takes, so our biggest challenge was to perfect the choreography in relation to the space. We had to synchronize all the actors without loading the long takes with useless actions, everything had to have meaning. Fred and I filmed all the rehearsals during which we had to get the acting, the camera movements and the technical issues all right. We needed everything to be in perfect running order because we only had six weeks of shooting in Tunisia and one week in Turkey, and we couldn't afford to waste time on set.

You have remained loyal to your cinematographer Frédéric Noirhomme who had already worked with you on Hedi. How do the two of you complement each other?

When Fred and I met, even though it was via Skype, it was love at first sight. I was really nervous: it was my first film and I needed a top-notch technician. Our Belgian co-producers, Les Films du Fleuve, suggested several people, and the first one I spoke to, on Skype, was Fred. There was amazing chemistry between us straight away – first, on a human level, because he's funny, straightforward, and manages to be both very warm and pushy at the same time. And on a cinematic level, we discovered we were kindred spirits. Things went so well on Hedi that it was inconceivable for us not to work together on Dear Son (Weldi). In fact, we've already talked about my next project! We share the same references, we like the same films, we're on the same wavelength. We both like simplicity, and we both dislike gimmicks or using beautiful lighting for the sake of beautiful lighting. The idea of shooting in long takes on Dear Son (Weldi) did not come up at the start – it developed gradually over the course of our discussions when we thought about how best to serve the

story and characters and when I said I didn't wish to use too many close-ups or shot reverse shots so as not to be too heavy-handed in getting the message across. At the same time, we did not want the long takes to become systematic. If we felt that a particular sequence needed to be cut to enhance its emotional impact, we cut it.

So you spent a week filming in Turkey – was it complicated?

The hardest part was getting the shooting permit. We thought it would be a simple formality, but it turned out to be one of the most stressful processes I've been through! On the other hand, once we had the permit, it was very easy to go on location and shoot. The production crew and the actors were all very friendly and efficient.

You are also loyal to your producers, who have been working with you since your first short films. After Hedi's success and awards in Berlin – the Silver Bear for Best Actor, and Best First Feature Award – it must have been easier to get funding for Dear Son (Weldi)...

Yes, of course, I had a much more comfortable budget than I did for Hedi. And it has allowed me to improve the post-production. I'm very lucky because producer Dora Bouchoucha, line producer Lina Chaabane, and I are a great team. We've been working together for almost 20 years, and the amazing thing is that telling stories brings us as much joy now as it did then – if not more so. Above and beyond their role as producers, they collaborate

with me from the writing stage all the way through to the editing stage, and their input is always positive.

The Dardenne brothers are still coproducing your films. Were they as involved as they were in Hedi? They were less involved in the script than they were on Hedi, but they were more involved in the editing.

If you could retain only one image or one moment of the whole adventure of Dear Son (Weldi), what would it be?

The final scene of the film, which was shot near Gafsa in the south of Tunisia, it was our very last day of shooting in Tunisia. Everyone was very emotional, as you can imagine.



Filmography

- 2018 **Dear Son (Weldi)**
Competition - Directors' Fortnight 2018
- 2016 **Hedi (Inhebbek Hedi)**
Best First Feature - Berlinale 2016
Silver Bear Best Actor - Berlinale 2016
Grand Prix Arte Mare Festival Bastia - 2016
Grand Prix of the Bordeaux Festival - 2016
Best Movie - Afrykamera Festival - Warsaw - 2016
City of Amiens Award and Best Actress Award - Amiens Festival - 2016
Golden Athena - Athens Festival 2016
Best Actor - CGC 2016
Lumières Award for Best Francophone Film 2017
Arab Critics Award for Best Comedian 2017
- 2014 **Selma (Short Film)**
Official Competition at the Clermont Ferrand Festival 2014 (France)
Silver Fifog -2015 (Switzerland)
- 2011 **Loi 76 (Short Film)**
- 2008 **Mouja (Short Film)**
- 2006 **Kif Lokhrin (Short Film)**
Silver stallion of Yennenga FESPACO 2006
- 2004 **Romantisme, Deux Comprimés, Matin et Soir (Short Film)**



MOHAMED BEN ATTIA

Mohamed Ben Attia was born in Tunis in 1976. He studied audiovisual communication at the University of Valenciennes in France after graduating at the Institut des Hautes Etudes Commerciales (IHEC) in Tunis in 1998. He has directed five short films, ROMANTISME, DEUX COMPRIMÉS, MATIN ET SOIR (2004), KIF LOKHRIN (Silver award at Fespaco 2006), MOUJA (2008), LOI 76 (2011) and SELMA (2014), which was selected in the international competition of Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Festival and won several awards in various festivals. He directed his first feature INHEBBEK HEDI in 2016 which won the Best First Film Award and the Silver Bear for Best Actor at the 2016 Berlinale as well as great critic and audience acclaim around the world. The film was released in more than twenty countries.



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