South of France. In the sultry August heat, Geronimo, a young social educator, tries to ease tensions between the youngsters of the St Pierre neighborhood. The mood changes when Nil Terzi, a teenage girl of Turkish origin, flees an arranged marriage, running to the arms of her gypsy lover, Lucky Molina. Their escape sparks hostilities between the two clans. When the jostling and the musical battles begin, Geronimo struggles to quell the ensuing unrest around her.

‘Geronimo’ is different to my previous films. I felt freer’

Interview by Mélissa Bounoua

GERONIMO

GERONIMO

MÉLISSA BOUNOUA: Geronimo was an Apache. Geronimo is also a social educator, a street monitor who saves young people in your new film. Did you draw inspiration from the ones you encountered when you were in France, in 1962?

TONY GATLIF: In developing the character of Geronimo, I was inspired by one of my street educators, who is now eighty-five years old and a friend of mine. I wanted to show these amazing people. I’ve seen them snap kids out of a violent trance, saving them just by talking to them. When I was in reform school, one of them was dealing with some thirteen-year-old kid who was going crazy, banging his head against the floor. I must have been fifteen or sixteen years old and I witnessed the scene. A circle of us formed around them. The educator handled it by talking: ‘Can you hear me? Can you hear? Stop this, you’re hurting yourself.’ The boy didn’t react. I said, ‘Put a cushion under his head!’ He heard the one thing that wasn’t me. Someone said, ‘He’s got a knife.’ Some guy, ‘You panic, you don’t trust anyone, you really want to run away.’ The action was superb and very real because when we shot the scene, Nailia actually jumped out before the car had stopped! During editing, I saw what we had, I was stunned. It sent a chill down my back.

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What made you think of casting Céline Sallette?

MB: What were you saying by calling her Geronimo, after a 19th-century Apache?

TG: He was an Apache, he saw his family massacred by the Mexicans, who shouted ‘Saint Geronimo!’ to protect themselves when he came to avenge their deaths. So he adopted the name. Geronimo is the symbol of someone who has had his soul, his land and his people stolen from him; someone who has been betrayed. He’s a rebel warrior. He stands for all those who have been betrayed and sold. It was also about giving the character the name of a saint, like you’d give someone the name Pierre. Calling a woman after an Indian was already kind of rebellious.

TG: What made you think of casting Céline Sallette?

MB: As soon as I saw Céline, I knew she was the one. She’s around thirty, she’s closer to the other young actors than she is to me. I liked that. She’s a strong character, she knew how to speak to them, she knew that they’re apt to go off the rails and she defended them. I wrote her a letter to explain the inspiration for her role – a 25-year-old singer I met in Andalusia in the nineties during the filming ofLatcho Drom. People called her Caïta. I’d chosen her to represent the Spanish gypsies. I was blown away by her behavior. She was a free-spirited gypsy woman who lived with her partner, a young woman, and who everyone regarded as a princess, a queen. She was unattainable, and yet she spat in the street and was hardly the type he’d figure, a father. That was in the original screenplay but I didn’t like it, I kept rewriting it every couple of weeks. I couldn’t put my finger on what was wrong. Women are stronger, fairer, and not so common. Guys are always cast as the savors, the ones who sort things out, the ones in charge.

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to go to church every morning, far from it! She wasn’t afraid of anyone. Even the police revered her. Once I’d added the character traits of Cazia, I had the film. Céline Sallette could handle it and she had the look. She brought her life.

MB: Did it change the way you make a movie?

TG: You film guys and women differently. It’s a new kind of writing, a film seen through someone’s eyes. That’s the perspective I used with Céline.

Gypsies say that you see someone through their soul, which can be glimpsed through the eyes, as if Gypsies say that you see someone through their eyes, as if you were looking through a gypsy’s eye. That’s the perspective I used with Céline.

ML: Was the decision to let the camera be hand-held on the shoulder of Patrick Ghiringhelli, the DP, always ready to go, when we were shooting medium close and had to back off or pull in, it was instantaneous. I’d never done that before in my films, it meant I never had to let up with the actor or the emotion.

MB: Do you think the direction of it?

TG: Always big, always big! Open spaces are everywhere in the film. The interiors were shot in an old, abandoned metal working plant, near Saint-Etienne, in a hall twice the size of a cathedral. Open spaces are everywhere in the film. There was nothing distracting the director. Whatever the action, we could follow the actor all the way, always filming in 360°. The camera had no base, it was handheld on the shoulder of Patrick Ghiringhelli, the DP, always ready to go. When we were shooting medium close and had to back off or pull in, it was instantaneous. I’d never done that before in my films, it meant I never had to let up with the actor or the emotion.

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TG: I always dig into my personal history for my movies: there are Gypsies in all of them, and in this one. I have the direct education of my teenage years. As for arranged marriages... When I was eleven years old, I lived in the suburbs of Algiers, near the shanty-towns. One day, my brother disappeared. You have to imagine this very handsome guy, who looks like Marlon Brando and is always in trouble. One night my mother sent me to the woods to give him some food. She said, ‘Whatever you do, don’t tell anyone.’

He had to pulsat in front of the camera. No insults, no humiliations, no pressure, just words. He had to pulsat in front of the camera. No insults, no humiliations, no pressure, just words.

MB: You took liberties with the direction?

TG: Gerónimo is different to my previous films. I felt free to choose to have no walls in the sets, and no stars. I wanted to get rid of any barriers so that the camera could come and go without hitting anything. The interiors were shot in an old, abandoned metal working plant, near Saint-Etienne, in a hall twice the size of a cathedral. Open spaces are everywhere in the film. There was nothing distracting the action. Whatever the action, we could follow the actor all the way, always filming in 360°. The camera had no base, it was handheld on the shoulder of Patrick Ghiringhelli, the DP, always ready to go. When we were shooting medium close and had to back off or pull in, it was instantaneous. I’d never done that before in my films, it meant I never had to let up with the actor or the emotion.

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TG: The focus of the movie is this young woman, Nil, from a Turkish family, who flees an arranged marriage to the arms of the man she loves – Lucky, who has a Spanish background. In making the film, were you seeking to condemn this tradition?

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A few days earlier my parents had told him that come the day he didn’t know her, and he ran off. I saw the sadness and distress of my teenage brother, who didn’t want a wife or children. After ten days, he came home and got married. My grandfather said to me sweetly, ‘It’s your turn next.’ That’s when I ran away from home and came to France. That story is kind of Nil’s story in the film. Showing this girl who runs away is like showing my opposition to this practice from a bygone age. There were no honor killings in my family. But it’s so entrenched in North Africa, Turkey, India... It’s like a death to me. It shouldn’t exist in this day and age. It’s a return to the Middle Ages. To people who say, ‘Well, that’s just the way we do things,’ when you haven’t heard about these traditions for almost a hundred years, I feel like saying: ‘Are you clinging to this practice because of some sickness in your life?’ Once they’re eighteen, they declare themselves head of the family and want to harm their own sister. It’s absolutely crazy. In the film, Fazil wakes up as a true Anatolian Turk from another age. In order to exist, he goes back to the time of his great-grandfather.

For the families that perpetuate this, the disgrace is so black that it becomes difficult for them to live with. They stop going out, they can’t look their neighbors in the eye. It’s killing them. The only cure is to wash away the dishonor by making their daughter or sister disappear. It upsets me to think of these modern girls finding themselves in these situations when they are students, they have a life.

MB: Is it also a way of saying that society cannot prevent these traditions and revenge killings?

TG: Society has rules that do not chime with this...
‘Gypsies say that you see someone through their soul, which can be glimpsed through the eyes, as if through a window.’

The police are powerless to act, that’s why they don’t spring, he’d be marrying his cousin. He freaked out, feature in the movie. If a family went to see them, saying that the brothers want to kill the sister, they would just say, ‘File a complaint.’ Whereas no one is going to report their own family, it doesn’t make sense. These practices don’t fit in with modern, western society, which doesn’t have the words or the codes, and fails to grasp this backward step. It’s archaic. However those who practice it aren’t backward. They have cars, cell phones... They are modern today.

Romeo and Juliet or García Lorca’s Blood Wedding kind of story. I wanted viewers to be affected by a victim of tradition; to feel a malaise that I believe is at the origin of terrorism. It’s a new language produced by honor killings – a guy who no longer has any fear of getting hurt, who seems untouchable. Society is powerless, lost, completely disarmed.

MB: The violence is perpetrated through music and dance. Why didn’t you show it more graphically, in the clashes between the Turkish and Spanish clans?

TG: I told Stéphane Hessel before his death: ‘You’ll have to show it, the better to dismantle it.’ Making film is the hardest thing to do. I especially didn’t want anyone to enjoy the violence. It’s everywhere in Geronimo, simmering below the surface without ever exploding. Music injects excitement and edginess, it highlights the tension of the wait. I wanted one of the few violent scenes to be brutal, to be filmed a raw way. I told my DP, ‘We’re going to do it as in Marseilles, with the awful white, midday light, to show that it’s dumb and stupid.’ The shots aren’t shots, it’s filmed with urgency. The blood comes much later. It isn’t about modesty, I was keen not to make a show of it. The show is the music and dance. In the scenes where the two clans square up to one another, there are people all around, shouting and cheering them on. They are horrified but they show it by dancing. All the actors knew that every dance step was a violent act. Like drawing a bow without even knowing when the arrow will fly off. Then things degenerate.

MB: How did you compose the music at the center of the film? Certain scenes are like a musical. I’m thinking of West Side Story...

TG: The clash scenes were the hardest; one involved a 7-minute sequence shot. There were two types of music – a Turkish version and a Spanish version. We mixed the flamenco with Turkish music according to the edit and which clan was on screen. When the two gangs display their weapons and the pressure cranks up, each weapon is in fact an instrument, and the actors/musicians had an earpiece so they could stay in perfect rhythm. Every element in the set became musical. For example, the post that one of the characters bangs on produces an amazing resonance thanks to the instruments we added: beyond the wood, there’s bass, drums... In the end, everything was shot in rhythm although the music had been composed ahead of time, because music is always the starting point of my films. Delphine Mantouret and Valentin Dahmani began work 18 months before the film began, when I started writing the screenplay. The choice of Turkish and Spanish communities was made because they are countries whose music appeals to me. Turkish music is the root of all the music I’ve
‘A lot of the cast had practically no experience. They had to be non-professional to play these parts.’

enjoyed. Arah, flamenco, Grce... From Turkey to Spain, the same rhythms are found. There’s the way of beginning songs with Aman, Aman, then the story follows. They use it as a starting point to find the tone of the song. That happened with the film – I had to find the rhythm, the music that went with it. For the Spanish family, there’s modern flamenco, which the kids adapt in the film with a hip-hop rhythm. Flamenco pulls together all the rhythms the gypsies encountered as they crossed India, Turkey, Romania, and the countries of the East (which I showed in Latcho Drom). Spain is a melting pot for all types of western and oriental music. I’m always guided by music.”
‘My only fear was that he’d be too sensitive because he has a heavy past. I was worried he might explode, that the invention might become reality. But you have to be bold and take risks or there’s no film.’
A movie written and directed by TONY GATLIF
CELINE SALLETTE Garnier
RAOUF YOSI Hashi
DAVID MIRJZA Lucky
WALLA HARDOUNE Méki
VINCENT HENNINQ Antares
ABDUR RAZZ XI Hinz
ARSEK IŠTEKI Kemal
TIM SÉRIE Yeha
SÉBASTIEN HOUSANI Hassan
YANNICK ADELEF Tiki Scorpion
ARTHUR VANDEPOEL Ies
MARIE-CARON Sida
PIERRE OBRAUDIN Youpin
ALEXIS BAGMAMA Arûs Yasa
With the friendly participation of SERGI LÓPEZ
Hip-hop dancers
MOUSSA FONNA Wà
OMAR BEN EMA Assetsa
AHMED CHOUKHÉNI Zigàq
MEDIO HARRAD Jàno
Flamenco dancer
TOMASITO Innocenzo
PRADO JIMÉNEZ Prudá
S.O.S.
PATRICK GIRGINHIELLI
Original soundtrack: DELPHINE MANTOULET
VALENTIN DAHMANN
Musical direction TONY GATLIF
Sound PHILIPPE WELSH
Film editing MONIQUE GARTONNE
Executive producer DELPHINE MANTOULET
Production accountant SYLVAIN MEHEZ
1st director assistant JEAN-LUC ROZE
2nd director assistant VALENTIN DAHMANN
Director assistant JULIEN DIRA
Script ANDRA BARBUCA
Cast EVY GIULIOU
Teenagers cast VERONIQUE RUGGIA
Production manager CHRISTIAN FRUNER
Unit manager NICOLAS BEUSSIEU
Sound editing ADAM WOLFY
Mixing DOMINIQUE GABORIAU
Costumes CATHERINE RIGALI
Make-up LAURENCE GROSJEAN
Set photographer PIERRE PEIGE
Shooting locations France : régions Rhône-Alpes & Languedoc-Roussillon
GERRINGO

In coproduction with RHÔNE-ALPES CINÉMA, with the participation of Région RHÔNE-ALPES, with the participation of CENTRE NATIONAL DE LA CINÉMATOGRAPHIE ET DE L’IMAGE ANIMÉE and the support of FONDS IMAGES DE LA DIVERSITÉ, with the participation of CANAL +, with CINES, in co-production with CINÉMA B, with the support of Région LANGUEDOC-ROUSSILLON, in partnership with le CENTRE NATIONAL DE LA CINÉMATOGRAPHIE ET DE L’IMAGE ANIMÉE, with the support of l’Unité, L’ÉGALITÉ NATIONALE POUR LA COHÉSION SOCIALE ET L’ÉGALITÉ DES CHANCES — COMMISSION IMAGES DE LA DIVERSITÉ

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