


salvation army

A FILM BY ABDELLAH TAÏA



A cinematic still from a film showing two shirtless men sitting on a beach. The man on the left, younger, is wearing red briefs and is focused on reading a magazine. The man on the right, older, is wearing dark blue briefs and is looking towards the younger man with a serious expression. They are sitting on a patterned towel on the sand. The background consists of a weathered wooden wall on the left and a vast, sandy beach extending to the right under a bright, hazy sky.

SYNOPSIS - Abdellah's story is in two parts. First, as a teenager in a dark and sexual Morocco, then as a young adult landing in Geneva.



ABDELLAH TAÏA (39) is the first Moroccan and Arab writer to have openly come out about his homosexuality. He is the author of *An Arab melancholia* (2008), *Le jour du Roi* (Prix de Flore 2010) and *Infidels* (2012), all published by Le Seuil Editions. *Salvation Army*, adapted from his eponymous novel, is his first full-length feature movie. His novels are translated into several languages.

1- What led you to film-making ?

First and foremost, Egyptian movies. Generally, Arab people are always connected to artistic works produced in Egypt, such as movies, series and songs. As a boy, I discovered all of it on television and I learned to like the images, the people who spoke in Arabic, my language. This Egyptian obsession clearly led me to film-making and to linking my Moroccan reality, my large, moneyless family, to the reality of Egyptian movies. It helped me conduct a form of fusion, of transformation. Contrarily to what Western people may think, this type of cinema gave birth to great movies (and not only those directed by Youssef Chahine). Despite the prohibitions and the taboos, there was a certain idea of freedom and transgression that was expressed fully and prodigiously. The bodies of Egyptian actresses were my first lesson in artistic freedom. I admired them for their talent and for their audacity. In a way that was sometimes subtle and sometimes outrageous, they represented our political and social difficulties and our wish to move into action. Burn it all. Liberate ourselves. That's it : this is how I learned to decode movie images and particularly to create a vital, artistic and mysterious bond between them and me. Then I became a writer. Several of my novels have been published, all written in French. But my literary work was influenced by my Egyptian movie obsessions.

the 8 questions

2-Incidentally, « L'armée du salut » (Ed . du Seuil, 2006) is originally one of your novels. How did you take on the movie adaptation. ?

I understood fairly quickly that I had to forget the book, and not even try to read it again. I needed to find a movie project that would follow the main line of the novel without necessarily trying to be faithful to it. It took me almost two years to do it. To go beyond the novel. To objectivize a story that is mostly autobiographical. In other words, the hero (who also bears my name: Abdellah) had to emerge from a certain reality to find another:



the movie reality. Abdellah is me. But not only. It was only when that work was done that I was able to write the screenplay, to «burn» the novel, free myself and the characters at the same time. The only thing I had to be faithful to was my vision of Morocco, of a Moroccan self that is impossible to construct freely.

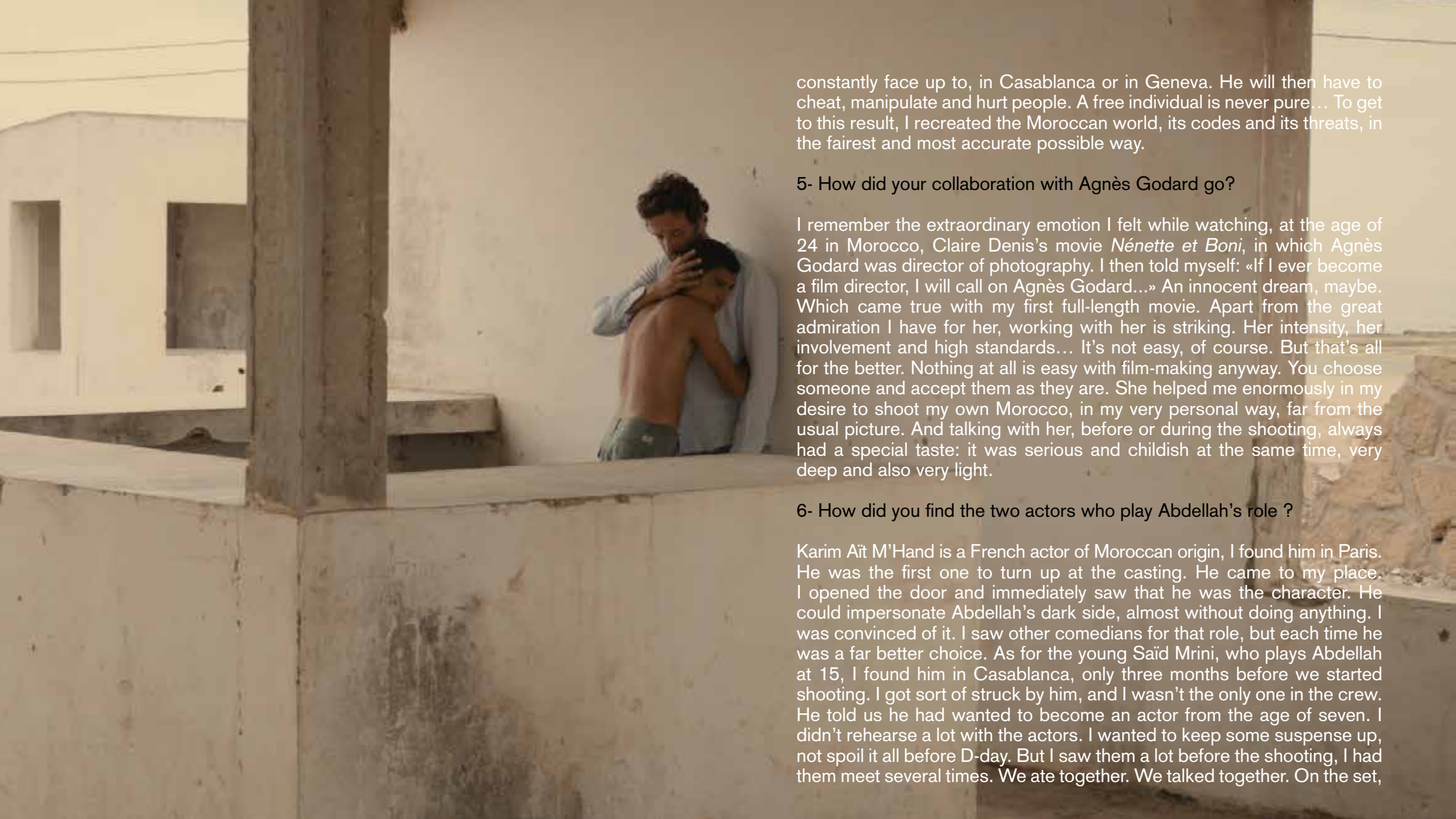
3- The question of homosexuality is here set in a particular place: Morocco. How did the shooting go ?

The movie confronts the question of homosexuality, but without trying to be scandalous. Its reality within a family, in the streets of a working-class neighbourhood of Casablanca. Tensions were very strong during the shooting in Morocco. The Moroccan actors and technicians were fantastic. But attacks could come from anywhere. From a certain Moroccan press which incidentally tried to ban the shooting. From islamists who, a month before, had violently demonstrated against a conference around my novels at El Jadida university (El Jadida is one of the cities where we shot the movie). From anyone in the street, who had heard about the nature of the project and the name of the movie director. So we had to constantly protect ourselves and make sure that the extreme daily tension would not turn into a major handicap.

4-The film depicts Morocco as it has never been depicted in movies before...

It was not only about getting away from the Moroccan clichés that are conveyed within and without the country. I had to show the naked truth, without concessions. The truth about Morocco. My own truth. I had to shoot characters who would express, almost without speaking, all the devastating ambiguities of this country. A true self is possible, but at what price ? Homosexuality is here, inside and outside the house. But who will acknowledge that individuality ? And what about the others ? The hero of the movie is homosexual, but he is neither an innocent nor a victim. Like the other characters, he uses the same weapon: malignancy. More than the «problem» of homosexuality, this difficult legacy is what he will have to





constantly face up to, in Casablanca or in Geneva. He will then have to cheat, manipulate and hurt people. A free individual is never pure... To get to this result, I recreated the Moroccan world, its codes and its threats, in the fairest and most accurate possible way.

5- How did your collaboration with Agnès Godard go?

I remember the extraordinary emotion I felt while watching, at the age of 24 in Morocco, Claire Denis's movie *Nénette et Boni*, in which Agnès Godard was director of photography. I then told myself: «If I ever become a film director, I will call on Agnès Godard...» An innocent dream, maybe. Which came true with my first full-length movie. Apart from the great admiration I have for her, working with her is striking. Her intensity, her involvement and high standards... It's not easy, of course. But that's all for the better. Nothing at all is easy with film-making anyway. You choose someone and accept them as they are. She helped me enormously in my desire to shoot my own Morocco, in my very personal way, far from the usual picture. And talking with her, before or during the shooting, always had a special taste: it was serious and childish at the same time, very deep and also very light.

6- How did you find the two actors who play Abdellah's role ?

Karim Aït M'Hand is a French actor of Moroccan origin, I found him in Paris. He was the first one to turn up at the casting. He came to my place. I opened the door and immediately saw that he was the character. He could impersonate Abdellah's dark side, almost without doing anything. I was convinced of it. I saw other comedians for that role, but each time he was a far better choice. As for the young Saïd Mrini, who plays Abdellah at 15, I found him in Casablanca, only three months before we started shooting. I got sort of struck by him, and I wasn't the only one in the crew. He told us he had wanted to become an actor from the age of seven. I didn't rehearse a lot with the actors. I wanted to keep some suspense up, not spoil it all before D-day. But I saw them a lot before the shooting, I had them meet several times. We ate together. We talked together. On the set,

I directed them in a very precise way. The two actors who play Abdellah may not look alike but they both have a face that perfectly expresses opacity. They are inscrutable, impenetrable. This is what I wanted to express in the movie: a world where things cannot be understood at once.

7- Did the recent events in the Arab world have an influence on the movie ?

Necessarily, and even in an unconscious way, the revolutionary spirit that is currently shaking the Arab world has entered the movie, whether I wished it or not. We are indeed witnessing the big awakening of the Arab, political and individual. He is looking at himself, diagnosing himself and most importantly, criticizing himself. For the Arabs, freedom is no longer a fantasy, a Western idea, it is now set in all their hearts. The extreme divergences and the violence that goes with them are inevitable. The Arab body was sick, it is now healing. Cinema must take part in this historical movement. Personally, I feel comforted in my aspirations. I am an Arab homosexual, and I am not the only one. I am no longer alone. Claims for individual freedom, obviously including those of homosexuals, are part of this revolution. Despite the numerous uncertainties, the Arabs are seriously beginning to hope...

8- Salvation Army is an openly autobiographical movie. Your hero even bears your first name. How did you grow up in Morocco, as a homosexual ?

When I was a teenager, any signs of a well-accepted homosexuality were absent from real life and from Arab movies... Homosexuality was constantly associated with mental illness, social shame, a sin. To survive I had to make up my own cultural codes. I had to convince myself I had that right. The exclusion and the solitude were not always easy to bear. Much later, at the age of twenty, I discovered secondary characters who bore some signs of homosexuality in movies by Youssef Chahine, Salah Abou Seif, or Youssef Nassrallah,. But they were not totally in the light. Something was missing... In the collective Arab mind, there is no homosexual hero.





Written and directed by Abdellah Taïa

MAIN CAST

*Young Abdellah: Said Mrini
Adult Abdellah: Karim Ait M'hand
Slimane: Amine Ennaji*

MAIN CREW

*Director of Photography: Agnès Godard
First Assistant: Guillaume Bonnier
Editor: Françoise Tourmen
Sound Mixer: Henri Maikoff
Sound Editor: Fanny Martin
Rerecording Sound Mixer: Christophe Vingtrinier*

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PRODUCTION COMPANIES

LES FILMS DE PIERRE
Hugues Charbonneau
Marie Ange Luciani

LES FILMS PELLÉAS

Philippe Martin

RITA PRODUCTION

Pauline Gygax
Max Karli


ALI N'FILMS

Frantz Richard

SHOOTING LOCATIONS

Morocco: Casablanca, El Jadida
Switzerland: Geneva

TECHNICAL SPECS

Format: 1.85
Sound: 5.1 Dolby 
Length: 1h24

CONTACT FESTIVALS

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