

quinzaine
DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT
CANNES 2023

Deserts

A film by Faouzi Bensaïdi



SCREENINGS :

Thursday May 18 at 8:30 am, Théâtre Croisette
Thursday May 18 at 5:30 pm, Théâtre Croisette





Western Drama | France, Germany, Morocco, Belgium
Language: Arabic | 125'
French distributor: Sophie Dulac

SYNOPSIS

Tajid

CREDIT



Mehdi & Hamid work for a collection agency in Casablanca, in Morocco.

Both gawky associates roam remote villages of the great South of Morocco to get money out of overextended people.

IN FRONT OF THE CAMERA

Hamid : Fehd Benchemsi

Mehdi : Abdelhadi Taleb

The Escaped one : Rabii Benjhaile

Selma : Hadda / Hajar Graigaa

BEHIND THE CAMERA

Director : Faouzi Bensaïdi

Producer : Saïd Hamich Benlarbi

Co-producers : Nicole Gerhards, Sébastien Delloye

Screenwriter : Faouzi Bensaïdi

Editors : Faouzi Bensaïdi, Véronique Lange

DOP : Florian Berutti

Production Designer : Veronique Sacrez

Sound : Patrice Mendez, Abderrazak Amouzoune, Luc Thomas

INTERVIEW WITH FAOUZI BENSÄÏDI

By Xavier Leharpeur

CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THE TITLE AND ITS INTRIGUING PLURAL FORM ?

It's the original title. In my mind, the story started in this urban fringe of a Moroccan village - like a desert of misery - before continuing in a literal desert. There was also this idea that every human being has their own desert. An empty space in which each person comes face to face with their true self. Lastly, it's in the plural form because the life of these men is also an emotional desert.

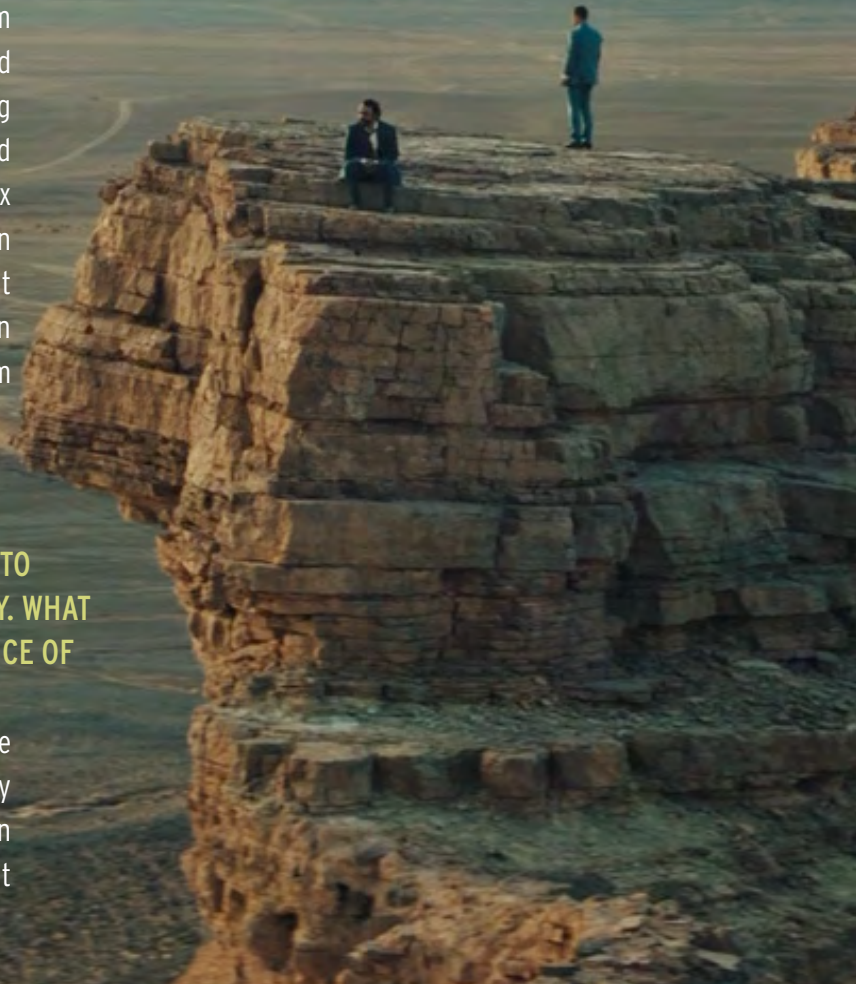
HOW DID THIS FILM COME ABOUT ?

For me, films spring from a snapshot of life. I was in a hotel in Marrakech and it was breakfast time. Two men were sitting next to me. They were wearing almost identical suits and each had a briefcase. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but their gestures were almost synchronized. That's where it

all began. I started to imagine what their life was like. Were they staying in the same room because they didn't have enough money? Did they save up to buy a car? I started taking notes without knowing what I would end up with. At first, I pictured the men as tax inspectors (*laughs*). Later, I was walking in Casablanca, and I saw a huge advertisement for a debt collection agency. That's when things started to click into place. The film was starting to take form.

YOU SWITCH FROM SLAPSTICK COMEDY TO ABSTRACT, ALMOST MYSTICAL, TRAGEDY. WHAT INTERESTS YOU ABOUT THIS COEXISTENCE OF VERY DIFFERENT GENRES ?

First of all, I really enjoy combining these different genres. It's like a patchwork. My filmmaking has always gone in this direction and, for a long time, I wondered why. It



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probably comes from my childhood. I grew up in a house where my mother embodied comedy and my father tragedy. My mother was always laughing. And then there was my father, weighed down by life. Everything was important for him. In terms of his political engagements, he was a romantic. He stayed loyal to his leftist ideas, but he abandoned his dream of becoming a politician. He lacked the necessary violence (...). He would transform everything into serious rituals that my mother would then brush off with a bit of mockery. I grew up in this atmosphere and I find this in my writing. I have no trouble veering off in a different direction, even within a sequence. I should mention that I started out in theatre. I was fascinated by the plays of Shakespeare, a writer who was able to surpass the limits of genres by daring to add the Fool to the King Lear tragedy.

THE FILM SLIDES FROM REALISM INTO THE ABSTRACT...

I work on this fine line. I like when surrealism

overlaps realism. When it arises from different turning points. For example, the scene with three superheroes sitting in the back seat of a car. Who are they? Then, one of them picks up his phone and says that they're on their way, that they're flying to their destination. And then we discover that they have a shitty job in a mall. In filmmaking, we're often told to make sure things are coherent. But since when has life been coherent? In the second part of the film, I was able to develop this incoherence, which naturally exists in our lives. I was able to go to a world before words, a world that exists outside of time, where men, animals and nature lived in harmony, towards a Western and its mythologies, without imposing anything.

EVEN SO, THE SCREENPLAY NEVER STRAYS OFF ITS MARK. IT IS METICULOUSLY CONSTRUCTED...

I do a lot of preparation in advance: the script, the construction of the tale and even the shooting script. This gives me more freedom in the end. Like music, the foundation has to

be solid to allow the unexpected to happen during the shoot. For example, I like certain signs to reappear, like echoes.

The film opens on a map held by two guys at the side of a highway. I tell their story, but I immediately warn the viewers that if they want to plunge into the film, they must - like our heroes - let the map fly away. Later, the map returns with the migrants who draw one on the ground.

Let's forget about maps and highways. Let's take the side roads !

Likewise, for the characters, I put them together by taking them apart, to give them more complexity.

You have this sequence of the business seminar with the head of the debt collection agency, which unites all the ambitions of the film and its political engagement: slapstick, social issues, the graphic aspect of the images ... The poor vs. the poor: like all the employees, the two guys are barely making a living, and they're sent out to attack people who are in



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even worse conditions than they are. It's the Uberization of the world. They go so far as to applaud the announcement of the end of social security contributions.

In my own life, I switch between euphoria, laughter and deep melancholy. The film is the same.

WHERE DID YOU GET THE IDEA FOR THE CHROMATIC RANGE FOR THE SUITS ?

At first, the suits were the same boring grey. Then, I realized that sending two guys into the desert in colourful suits could create a welcome clash. When they're in the office, they fit right into the décor: one with the blues, the other with the greens. This violent liberalism is sugar-coated. People are sent out to kill you, but they're dressed in bright, tutti frutti colours.

The writing often makes use of ellipses ...

I like to leave gaps, because this lets the viewer use their imagination. Between what they see and what we show them, there's room for interpretation.

With this in mind, for the final sequence, I didn't want to provide an answer.

There are two major turning points and tilts in the film. The arrival of the fugitive, who even enters the frame the wrong way, changes things completely: both in the story and in the mise-en-scène ... This comes from my passion for Westerns.

Then, a more formal sequence, improvised during shooting, where the car drives through the dust and disappears in this misty material that dreams are made of.

My formal and aesthetic approach, which backs the film's political engagement, is to highlight shots that are considered banal by today's filmmaking standards, such as straightforward cutaway shots.

As we switch from the first to the second part of the film, we gradually move away from the hustle and bustle of the world.

CAN YOU GIVE US AN EXAMPLE OF A MISE-EN-SCÈNE VARIATION ?

A simple example is how I filmed our two heroes' car sequences. Generally, this is simple and straightforward. You position the camera and off you go. However, if you think about the meaning of things, suddenly, I change the mise-en-scène. During the entire first part, I always film the car from the exterior. But, as soon as the fugitive gets into the car with them, to underline this turning point, the camera enters the car too. The sound recording changes because, as soon as the sound engineer adds the mics, there's no more sound from the road. We're cut off from the rest of the world. When the fugitive gets the car, this time I film from behind, to add a sense of mystery. We no longer know who's driving!

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His story becomes an oral narrative shared by the campfire. A tale within a tale ... I love to build this mise en abyme that blurs the boundaries between the two. In fact, this scene is preceded by a shot in which one character asks the other to tell him something that will make him forget. "But stories," the other character responds, "always remind us of something else." And, in the next sequence, we have the fugitive's tale. We started with slapstick built around two characters, and we imagine that the entire film will be based on them. Yet, they become secondary. They fade away and are replaced by the fugitive. And we run away with the fugitive, headed towards wonder and enchantment.

THE MISE-EN-SCÈNE MARKS ITS TERRITORY IN A PRECISE YET ADAPTIVE WAY. WHAT CHALLENGES WERE INVOLVED IN THIS ?

I might be a little extreme (laughs), but, for me, the mise-en-scène of a film rules everything. This doesn't stop me from liking and filming my actors. My films come from them. But I like when the mise-en-scène does its job. In other words, when it takes charge of part of the storytelling. The script is there, but it's fleeting. What matters is how you tell the story. This is almost more

important than the story itself. Even though I really showcase the characters, the plot, the construction. The ultimate goal is really for the mise-en-scène to take charge of all this and create meaning. So it can reveal all sorts of perspectives around the story.

The first part is based on images with very precise symmetry, but disturbed by a detail in the frame that breaks the perfection ... I could have been an architect. I'm interested in spaces. I'm instinctively able to place the camera in a precise spot and nowhere else. There's something geometric and mathematic about my approach. But I'm always aware of the need to open windows and let life flow in. Otherwise, you end up with cold filmmaking that freezes the characters and can constrict them.

THESE DETAILS ARE NEVER HIGHLIGHTED. YOU DON'T USE INSERTS...

No, never. It's risky, because when you go about things this way, everything has to work at the same time at certain moments. And there's always one point during the shooting when someone very nicely tells me that I need to cover my back. To do an over-the-shoulder shot, to add an insert, so that I can use another shot

for editing. And minimize the risks. But that's not how I work. I like the challenge that this represents, because this gives all of us the energy to really go for it. I know that I'm playing with fire, but I find it depressing to 'cover my back' because this would mean that I don't believe in what I'm doing (laughs).

AS A RESULT, YOUR MISE-EN-SCÈNE IS MAINLY BASED ON LONG TAKES...

It's not film theory. I do this naturally. It's my way of doing the shooting script. Above all, it's pure cinematic pleasure. This also comes from my passion since adolescence for films by Welles. For still frames, you have to organize the rhythm of the shot, find its inner music by orchestrating the entrances and departures from the frame. This is what I liked to do in theatre, which is an essence of the still frame. If the camera is moving, the goal is to look for precise elements of the narration and to enhance the overall composition with a solo, like a violin in an orchestra.

THERE ARE ALMOST NO CLOSE-UPS IN YOUR FILM.

From the start, I knew that there would hardly be any

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size for exceptional moments. The only two close-ups in the film are reserved for the fugitive and his wife, two secondary characters. We use the close-ups to celebrate their magnificent love story.

Viewers are force-fed close-ups all day long. So, after imposing this diet on them, when the close-ups appear in the film, it's like giving a glass of water to someone dying of thirst.

YOU FILM IN CINEMASCOPE. IS THIS A REFERENCE TO WESTERNS ?

Very quickly, I knew that it had to be either Scope or 4:3. It's intuitive, but I knew that I didn't want an intermediate format. I decided on Scope rather than square, because I really like the possibilities it offers for the symmetry that we talked about. The way that it brings out this little distortion, which, thanks to this format, becomes really significant on the screen. Also, to me, CinemaScope seemed almost natural to film the desert and this story with its almost cosmogonic dimension, its immense spaces.

ONCE YOU SET UP THE FRAME, YOU GIVE THE ACTORS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF BRINGING THE WHOLE SCENE TO LIFE. HOW DO YOU WORK WITH THEM IN THIS

CONTEXT ?

I ask for a great deal of preparation before the film and things that are not necessarily linked to the film itself. I work outside of the characters. My friendship with the actors allows me to call them in for work sessions that aren't directly related to the script. These aren't rehearsals.

They're like brainstorming sessions about the context of the characters. So, when they arrive on set, they're full of stories that are not in the film. I also improvise with stories that won't be shot. For Hamid and Mehdi, I wanted them to have a life that already existed before the film. However, when I'm shooting, I give them directions, while also giving them a lot of freedom in the frame. I expect them to come up with things.

They are in a precise movie frame, but they have a lot of autonomy, and they enjoy this, I think. I know the film so well that, when we're shooting, I can let myself stray off the path. The fact that I'm an actor also gives me access to another level. There's this idea that we're on the field together, in a trusting environment with mutual initiatives. Like musicians, sometimes we're a quartet, sometimes a rock group. It depends on the film we're making.

MANY PARTS OF YOUR FILM HAVE A POLITICAL SIDE. LIKE THE SEQUENCE IN THE AGENCY WITH THE WOMAN WHO LETS HER VEIL FALL...

Of course, but it's not a standard-bearer. I would like to be considered, first and foremost, as a filmmaker. I feel like films that come from our country are expected to be about a political issue, taboos that are hot topics, rather than about cinema. I'm not selling any ideology. My films have a political view, but my primary stance is an aesthetic one.

Today, I'm taking a stance by making a film with its ellipses, a film that respects the viewer's intelligence, a film that chooses to suggest rather than demonstrate. And, yes, I wanted this film to talk about poverty, the abandonment of entire populations, territorial splintering, and the capitalism that crushes our lives, our feelings and our emotions. And I'm not doing this because it's trendy and it's a "good wave" to ride right now. No. I'm facing an ocean, armed only with my passion and my faith in humankind, despite everything.



About Faouzi Bensaïdi

After three short films that won awards in Cannes and in Venice, Faouzi Bensaïdi directed his first feature film, *Mille Mois*, in 2003, which won two awards in *Un Certain Regard* in Cannes.

In 2006, *WWW: What a Wonderful World* was presented at Venice Days. In 2013, he directed *Death for Sale*, which won the CICAÉ award in Berlin.

His latest feature film, *Volubilis*, released in 2018, was selected at Venice Days.

He is also an actor for many authors such as Jacques Audiard, Nabil Ayouch, Bertrand Bonello, André Techiné or Nadir Moknèche.

Director's filmography 2022

2023 DESERTS

2022 AYAM SEIF

2017 VOLUBILIS

2014 SHORT PLAYS

2011 MORT À VENDRE

2006 WWW: WHAT A WONDERFUL WORLD

2002 MILLE MOIS

PRODUCER



CO-PRODUCERS



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