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**Berlinale** Competition

# IN A WHISPER

(A VOIX BASSE)

with  
EYA BOUTERAA  
HIAM ABBASS  
MARION BARBEAU

**A FILM BY LEYLA BOUZID**

France / Tunisia | 2026 | 1h52 | 1.85 | in Arabic and French



## Synopsis

Back in Tunisia for her uncle's funeral, Lilia is determined to get to the bottom of the mystery surrounding his death, even if it means digging up long-buried family secrets.

My first feature film, AS I OPEN MY EYES, was shot in Tunisia; A TALE OF LOVE AND DESIRE, in France. The common theme of these two films is how political and social forces shape the private sphere and how they can echo and modify our deepest feelings, our behaviour, our sexuality.

For my third film, IN A WHISPER, I wanted to return to Tunisia, more precisely to a coastal city where I spent my summer holidays as a child : Sousse. This film continues to interweave private and political spheres through the character of Lilia, who conceals part of her life from her family.

### **The film's original desire**

From the very beginnings of my desire to make films, I always dreamed of filming this house. It's my grandmother's house in rue de Carthage, in the heart of Sousse. Its potential for movement, flow and perspectives, the high-contrast chiaroscuro light it emanates, the antique timeworn furniture, everything about this house screams cinema. The lush vegetation that is literally consuming it lends it a surreal, magical aura in this cobbled street. It appears to exude a mystical energy, that of the lives lived in it, now gone, and whose mystery the camera attempts to capture. Ever since I was a teenager, I have made videos in this house, capturing its timelessness and so it was only natural that it should inspire my desire to make this third film. Even more so as it is soon to be sold and demolished, to be replaced by the blocks of flats that are inevitably springing up in this neighbourhood.



### **The city of Sousse**

Sousse is also a central part of this film. It is located 160 km to the south of Tunis, on the east coast, in the region known as the Tunisian Sahel. The city is marked by history: it was one of the main port cities of Roman Africa. It then thrived during the Arab-Muslim era. Since the 80s, it has been turned into a tourist city and gradually lost its essence. Its so-called colonial-style centre has been left to ruins while it is continually expanded with numerous hotel complexes. It is a patchwork city which, despite an ostensible modernity, has remained very conservative.

The film is, for me, deeply anchored in these two spaces: the house and the city of Sousse which, together, embody the tension between tradition and modernity.

### **The personal investigation**

The film begins with a catalyst: the mysterious death of Daly, discovered dead in the street, half naked. The context is established from the start: a funeral that is governed by numerous fixed and codified rules. Given his suspicious death, an embarrassment for the family, the speed at which he is buried simply doesn't "add up".

As the various stages of the funeral rites play out, questions emerge. The film then unfolds around this first puzzle: what happened ? Questioning first Daly's death and then his life itself.

Lilia, wanting to discover what happened to her uncle, finds herself confronted with her own lies. She can't stand not knowing the truth while she herself is lying.

Under pressure from his family, Daly was never able to live the life he could have lived. He was put in a social mould and that had deep repercussions on his whole family. The taboo was passed down to Lilia almost unwillingly. Her uncle's story has become part of the very essence of who she is and she finds herself leading a kind of double life. If she wants to avoid history repeating itself, Lilia must accept who she is and put a stop to the unspoken and other family secrets.



## **The Queer theme – Love lost, love saved**

The story of Daly's life reveals the way in which the attitude towards homosexuality in this bourgeois Tunisian family played out. Seen as a defect, treated as an illness, the unease it caused affected everyone.

I was struck to discover how in every Tunisian family, there's a "Daly". That uncle, cousin, friend, whose existence was crushed, and who remained a shadowy figure.

Daly's tragic death had to mean something. To allow Lilia to come out. Lilia's journey portrays a woman's emancipation from her family and her country. How to find the courage and strength to be what she is ? How to build something, have a child without telling her own mother ? How can one step into the future without embracing the present ? At the start of the film, Lilia can't see this, she believes she has everything under control. And it's there, in Tunisia, in an environment hostile to what she is, that her reality begins to flake.

Opposite her, or rather beside her, is Alice. The two women are in love. Alice knows and has seen that Lilia has reached a boundary that is stopping them build their life together. How, in this particular context, can love be allowed to triumph ? How to prevent this situation from seeping into the relationship's slightest cracks ? When the State, society, the police and your family all meddle in your most private moments and criminalise your sexuality, what weight does your relationship with the loved one bear ?

It is these cracks, these moments of loss of self-control that turn the characters' reality upside down to force them to reconstruct it that interest me and that I try to capture throughout this story.

It is also an opportunity for me to represent and film the love of these two women as no film has yet explored female homosexuality in an Arab and Muslim territory. It is absent from representation. Therefore it has no identification, no existence, no body. It is now necessary and indispensable to render them visible. Through this love story, I therefore want to suggest the focus shifts from what is forbidden to the beauty and intensity of feelings experienced.

### **An ensemble of actresses to form the circle of women**

First, there's Lilia. It is through her eyes that we enter this house and meet her family. Lilia is played by Eya Bouteraa, in what was almost her first screen role. I believe she's a true revelation. When I met Eya, I was struck by the difference between her real-life personality, very cheerful, and her on-screen presence, which hints at a silent melancholy, something elusive and fascinating. This charismatic presence was exactly what I was looking for.

Eya was prepared to fully embrace the role despite the subject and without judgement, which wasn't a given. Together, we explored the way in which the character, who has everything under control, gradually begins to crack and let go in order to open up. Eya did an exceptional and very precise job; from adapting her voice, to her way of walking, of moving around. Throughout the filming, she lived as Lilia, in her skin, seizing the slightest emotion with incredible precision.

Her mother, Wahida was a key figure for me. Wahida is a doctor, head of department. She's a strong, principled, uncompromising woman. She has a special place within this family that makes her stand apart from the others, with her own personal clarity.

I met Hiam Abbass at the Cinémathèque de Toulouse, by chance, and it was an obvious choice for me: I offered her the role on the spot. Hiam has a particular gift for inhabiting silence. Each gaze is an explosion. I consider myself lucky to have been able to direct her, to observe how she seized the character and moved through space. She brings all her subtlety and strength to the character of Wahida.

For the character of Alice, I wanted someone who would pair well with Lilia/Eya. During the casting, I was looking above all at how the pair worked together. When Marion Barbeau arrived, there was a palpable chemistry between the two actresses, an instant complicity. At the same time, their energy was different, they complemented each other. They were believable.

Marion perfectly embodied an Alice firm in her convictions, straightforward, but who could let herself go more easily. She is there to move her own story along.

The cornerstone of this house is Néfissa, the grandmother who rules with an iron fist, who dictates her law but to whom we quickly grow attached. I was lucky to have the opportunity to work with Salma Baccar. She is not an actress, she's a director. One of the first ever Tunisian female directors. She accepted the adventure with a challenge: if I could film her, she'd agree to be part of the adventure!

The circle of women is completed by Hayet, the aunt, played by Ferial Chamari. Ferial has boundless energy and was able to give Hayet her kindly nature, whilst at the same time being the guarantor of the family's moral code. Playing alongside Wahida, they formed that true sisterly dynamic of two very different women who have grown up together.

Daly is played by Karim Rmadi, who is not an actor. He works in the cultural sector and something impalpable about him drew me to him. Once again, he joined the cast because of that fleeting something that you can't put your finger on.

And as with Lilia but also Moncef (Lassaad Jamoussi), it wasn't easy to find actors who would embrace but also take the risk of playing these characters as they might be concerned this could compromise their safety in Tunisia.

## Chiaroscuro atmosphere

With this film, I further explore a minimalist and organic approach to staging alongside Sébastien Goepfert, the director of photography of my previous films. The main challenge was to recreate the atmosphere of light and shadows in the house, to which I was very attached. I had many family photographs which served as references.

Sébastien spent time in the house observing the light, the way in which it reflected naturally within the space. With great aptitude, he managed to recreate what had so marked me as a child.

We also wanted to emphasize a progression in the way we used the light: in the beginning, the house is closed-in on itself, dark, light barely penetrates. Then, little by little, it seeps in until it finally takes hold and floods everything with light. We worked with shifting areas of light and bold backlighting.

Much of the furniture and decoration are from my grandmother's house. The photographs on the walls are of my ancestors. But we chose the shades of the curtains carefully, the bedcovers, the colors of the costumes...

We were lucky enough to have the support of our producer, Caroline Nataf, who enabled us to explore and experiment some passages in the film such as the photo-novel of Daly's wedding which is a reference to one of my cult films : *La Jetée*. Or for the scene filmed using superimposition, in which Lilia and Alice's bodies become entangled.

We also worked with images from the past intertwining with the present. By creating spaces in which memory can resurface, we break with the rhythm of the investigation, not to evoke staged flashbacks like those in detective films, but to allow the past to emerge in layers of memories, like layer upon layer of varnish beginning to crack.

Time periods overlap in this house within the same shot and, during these moments, the film oozes magical realism. We have tried to render the memories real and present for Lilia.

As for the highly codified moments centred around the death rites, we approached them as tableaux vivants. They are sacred moments governed by a complex set of rules, and my interest in them was in an almost documentary sense.

## The music

During the preparation stage, the director of photography and I had long discussions about the atmosphere we wanted to create and it was then that he came across the album by Yom, *Alone in the Light*. He was convinced the music would perfectly transcribe what we wanted to express through the camera. I listened to the album and it was as though it were expressing something about the film for which there were no words. From then on, it accompanied me through the final preparation phase.

Yom was immediately on board and very enthusiastic about the project. Despite his prolific work creating music, he had never composed an original film score. So he joined the project at the start of the editing phase when Lilian Corbeille and I were still in discussions. It's an incredible chance to have the music at such an early stage and to be able to compose the film alongside the music. The oriental sounds of Yom's clarinet lend the film a mystical energy, a depth that resonates so well with the faces of these women and this house.

## What comes next

Today in Tunisia, homosexuality is legally considered a crime. Article 230 of the Penal Code stipulates the penalty can be up to three years' imprisonment "for sexual relations between two consenting adults of the same sex". This law was drafted by the French during the Protectorate era in 1913 and remains in force to this day. Depending on who is governing, this law can be applied more strictly. This has been the case for the past three years, during which time, arrests have increased. The use of an "anal test" that is reportedly able to prove male homosexuality is particularly condemned and likened to torture by many NGOs which demand its abolition.

Female homosexuality is far more despised by the authorities, even if there are few cases of prison sentences.

These two women in love in Tunisia, don't exist. Nor do they exist in representations, in films made in Arab countries. Not even in the eyes of those who criminalise them. They are utterly despised.

I wanted to take them by the hand and let them guide me through their journey. In the semi-darkness of this house, faced with Daly's unfulfilled, frustrated love, they will bring light, own their love, and gently carry out their revolution. Coming back at the end with a child is the best way to render them legitimate, to allow them to lay down roots in the foundations of Tunisian society: the family.

The journey spans from death to birth.

Cinema, through representation and identification, allows us to open closed doors, to give an existence to those who are forced to hide.

I hope that people in Tunisia and other Arab countries will be able to see the film. That it will enable these whispering voices to be heard as far and as loudly as possible and thus allow them to live their lives fully and freely.

# BEHIND THE CAMERA – LEYLA BOUZID

Leyla Bouzid was born and grew up in Tunis. She left to complete her higher education in France, first studying literature at the Sorbonne then cinema and directing at la Fémis.

She made her first feature film, AS I OPEN MY EYES, in Tunisia, and it was released in 2015. It won a prize at the Venice International Film Festival and over forty international prizes.

Her second feature film, A TALE OF LOVE AND DESIRE, filmed in France, was selected for the closing night of the Semaine de la Critique at the Cannes Festival, 2021.

IN A WHISPER, her third feature film, is being presented in the Official Competition at the Berlinale, 2026.

## Cast

EYA BOUTERAA *Lilia*

HIAM ABBASS *Wahida*

MARION BARBEAU *Alice*

FERIEL CHAMARI *Hayet*

SALMA BACCAR *Mamie Néfissa*

LASSAAD JAMOSSI *Moncef*

KARIM RMADI *Daly*

## Crew

DIRECTOR & WRITER : LEYLA BOUZID  
PRODUCER : CAROLINE NATAF  
CO-PRODUCER : HABIB ATTIA  
CINEMATOGRAPHY : SEBASTIEN GOEPFERT  
EDITING : LILIAN CORBEILLE  
SOUND : AYMEN LABIDI

ORIGINAL MUSIC : YOM  
FIRST ASSISTANT DIRECTOR : SALEM DALDOUL  
SCRIPT SUPERVISOR : LEILA GEISSLER  
PRODUCTION MANAGER (TUNISIA) : WALID LOUED  
PRODUCTION MANAGER (FRANCE) : THOMAS MORVAN  
POST-PRODUCTION MANAGER : ASTRID LECARDONNEL  
PRODUCED BY : UNITE  
IN COPRODUCTION WITH : CINETELEFILMS  
WITH THE SUPPORT OF : CANAL+

CINE+ / OCS  
FRANCE TELEVISIONS  
CENTRE NATIONAL DU CINEMA ET DE L'IMAGE ANIMEE (CNC)  
LA BANQUE POSTALE IMAGE 18  
PROCIREP - SOCIETE DES PRODUCTEURS / ANGOA  
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