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LES FILMS DU KIOSQUE PRESENTS

MARC ZINGA SABRINA OUAZANI

MAY ALLAH BLESS FRANCE!

A FILM BY ABD AL MALIK



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DISCOVERY

LES FILMS DU KIOSQUE

Presents

MAY ALLAH BLESS FRANCE!

A FILM BY ABD AL MALIK

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SYNOPSIS

The true story of a French teenager rising out from the underprivileged suburbs through love, education and rap music. Regis is a culturally gifted boy who dreams of success for his rap band through hard work and loyalty, but he must accept the drug money for the sake of his project.

Discovering Islam and love, he bears with the harsh loss and paybacks of delinquency, until he finds alone the strength to express himself through rap music and slam-poetry – and ultimately becomes a major artist of the French music scene.



DIRECTOR'S INTERVIEW

What made you decide to turn your autobiography *May Allah Bless France!* into a movie?

I didn't write the book with a film in mind, but while drafting the manuscript I was aware that I was potentially paving the way for the next step, which would be something more substantial, thanks to cinema. Cinema is an art which has a great capacity for humanization. It allows you to reach beyond the surface, in order to show that all beings function the same way. There are many fantasies about rap, urban cultures, difficult neighborhoods, delinquency and Islam, so I opted for an approach that would offset the sociological discourse entertained by the media, which tends to focus on statistics, but speaks very little about actual human beings.

Many films are made about low-income, urban neighborhoods but they are far too often from an outsider's point of view. They may be beautiful films, but they don't do us justice in their depiction of who we are. For example, they will address the theme of Islam only through the issue of religious fundamentalism. Fundamentalism does exist, but it only concerns a minority.

Isn't there any movie that does you justice in its depiction of people from low-income urban communities?

Yes, *La Haine* (by Mathieu Kassovitz). In my mind, this was the first movie where a filmmaker actually wanted to show a tough neighborhood from both a loving perspective and an artistic approach. Discovering this film as a kid was a powerful, indeed practically founding experience for me. And then afterwards, when I met Mathieu Kassovitz, we became friends, and we had a number of important discussions. He's the one who encouraged me to become a director. Yet, as sincere and truthful as I consider *La Haine* to be, it still isn't an insider's perspective.



This phenomenon isn't restricted to France. It's the same with Italian neo-realism, when you think about it. I wanted to break this cycle. Not because I held a grudge, but simply with the ambition of telling our story. When Italian Americans discovered *The Godfather* or *Mean Streets* for the first time, they finally saw themselves represented on film. They finally were a full-fledged part of America. I would like that for us. I would like that the people we are, as well as our issues and problems, be approached without it being something exotic. My aim is to show who we really are and undo this unhealthy myth that is perpetuated about us. That when people see Régis, Mike or Samir, they see France, with all of the communities that make up its various branches. My family's roots are in Africa but I am the fruit of French culture and education – and of Europe too. I grew up in Strasbourg, so the idea of Europe is perhaps even more concrete for me than for a Parisian!

What time period does the film take place in?

In a certain respect, I pick up where *La Haine* left off. Kassovitz didn't tackle the question of religion because it still wasn't as prevalent at the time. However, it has become a pervading social issue over the past two decades. My story doesn't have a specific date. It could very well happen today, or at the end of the 1990s.

Violence in your film is for the most part off screen...

I could have legitimately made the most violent film possible. But I wanted to tell the story of what there is before this violence, which occurs as a consequence. Samir might end up in Syria and die there. What I'm interested in is what happened to turn him into this guy who's going to fight in Syria.



You are careful to distance yourself from the mythology of violence and the fascination with Scarface in particular?

You have to realize the impact *Scarface* had on us. There really were people who fancied themselves as Tony Montana and died as a result. When somebody asks me how long it took me to make this film, I answer: thirty-eight years! In thirty-eight years, I've had the time to rid myself of a mythology that would have filtered out the true reality of these neighborhoods. It's almost as though I underwent a therapy that today allows me to get right to the heart of the matter and to have an artistic approach. I don't need to please anyone, nor do I wish to shock anybody; I just want to be as true as possible to myself and to the people I love and grew up with: my mother, my brother, my sisters, and the people from my community.

The film asks the question how far into illegality one can go without getting burnt.

I was a good student by day and a juvenile delinquent by night. It wasn't that I was schizophrenic; it was just that you don't want to be ostracized when you are in a group. My main character's personality developed from his environment. His mother raised him alone, in truly precarious conditions, an environment conducive to crime where delinquency is the only way of existing. At the same time, he is passionate about literature, writing, and rap music. And he has the ambition to do something with his passions. He already has within him the strength that will allow him to make it, but he doesn't yet know how to draw on this strength.

When his friend lets him know that it was his fault he was arrested and will certainly have to serve a ten-year prison sentence, you realize that he could have been the one sent to prison.

Yes. I wanted to film something that is impalpable: luck. How do some people make it through relatively unscathed and others don't? He also could have been sentenced to jail, or been killed in Rachid's place. It was important that I put myself in the mindset of the time, and that the Abd Al Malik of today disappear in order not to smother the young Régis.



In the scene at Rachid's funeral, your writing foresees the future for many disadvantaged youth – essentially a premature death.

I wanted the audience to quickly understand that we were frequently confronted with death. It was a violent but everyday reality for us. Violent because death didn't only touch the elderly. And common because so many people around us had untimely deaths. Friends, not just acquaintances. I wanted this list to be like a war memorial, in honor of those who have died; that it should be a suspended moment in the film which explains in part why the main character is this way, why he carries within him this wisdom, why for example he reads Seneca's *On the shortness of life*. Other filmmakers fantasize about broaching this violence. For me, it's a reality.

What was particularly powerful in the book was the expression of an inner, moral metamorphosis. How can you convey this interiority in cinema?

It's thanks to the actors. We had very little time to actually shoot the film - 28 days. But we worked for six months prior to filming to make sure that everything was in place. We rehearsed a lot and had script readings. We visited the locations where we were going to shoot the film to take in the atmosphere. The text had to be assimilated so that it would no longer be cinema but real life; the actors had to fully step into character, forget the camera. Only time and hard work could get us to that point. And their talent, naturally. For they are incredibly talented. And then we needed to find the cornerstone on which I could build an accurate account of a specific human being: the person who was going to play my character.



How did you find Marc Zinga?

I was starting to lose hope that I would ever find the right person to play my role. Then I accidentally ended up watching a one-off film on Canal + about Bob Denard in which Marc played Mobutu. He was phenomenal. I wanted to learn more about him, so I went to see him on stage in *A Season in the Congo* by Aimé Césaire and it was just incredible: it had to be him. Our meeting was a wonderful experience. We recognized ourselves in each other and understood one another right away.

As he was going to play the leader of a group, I wanted to create a tension between him and the others. I made sure he didn't come to the rehearsals right away, and I kept telling the other actors: "Be careful. Marc is coming soon, and there's no kidding around with him - he's from the theater and is classically trained; he's simply exceptional." They were impressed, but as they have a competitive spirit, it stimulated them as well.

Marc Zinga did the singing...

One of the criteria I had when looking for an actor was that he should be a musician. Marc has a big band. If nothing else, it's important in terms of rhythm for acting. Sometimes when I'm shooting a scene I don't even watch: I close my eyes and I listen to the musicality of the dialogue to see if it's working. Most of the film's actors are musicians. When you rap, you have to be "on the beat," and have a musical flair.

Not only does he sing well, but his vocal timbre is very close to yours.

I never imagined I would find someone of Marc's caliber. He makes me think of Method actors such as Robert De Niro or Denzel Washington. His way of soaking up a role, entering into my character, picking up things that are typical of me, just blew me away. He later admitted that he had gone onto YouTube to listen to me... The day he met the kids, he arrived with his script, sat down and they all started acting. As the group already knew each other well, they had their own language. In the next shot, Marc had changed his way of speaking to use their words and he had integrated their mannerisms.



And the actress who plays your mother?

Another non-professional actor. I saw an endless number of women, and I found her at the very last minute. Her screen tests were unbelievable. This character was the hardest to cast because she is so essential to the movie. Not only does the role personify my mother, but it is a synthesis of my rapport with women. I was raised by women and as a result, there are things that strike a feminine chord in me.

And Sabrina Ouazani?

She's also an exceptional actress. There is a disconcerting ease to her acting style, yet she is well-grounded and knows how to listen. In my mind, she's right up there with the best actresses. The real Naouale, my wife, was the one who had the idea to use her in

the film: "I want her to play my role." I didn't know Sabrina, but they knew each other. Sabrina has been a fan of my wife's music since she was a child.

The film is punctuated with shots demonstrating the geometric beauty of low-income housing neighborhoods...

I may have escaped the low-income housing developments in my mind through books, but it was my world all the same. And when you are a kid, you idealize things. I wanted to find this beauty again, film the housing blocks through my eyes at the time. These scenes are mini-interruptions in the story; they show you how everyday people live: they go shopping, go on strolls, etc...



Where did you shoot the film?

In Neuhof, where I grew up, reputed to be the most dangerous neighborhood in Strasbourg. There, where everything really happened, where I spent 28 years of my life, from the age of six until 33, and where a part of my family still lives. And, with the exception of Marc Zinga, Sabrina Ouazani and Mireille Perrier, all the actors, non-professional for the most part, are from my old neighborhood. So they are kids that I know, who I watched grow up. Even the people who work in the cafeteria or as security guards were from the housing complex. I always had at the back of my mind the will to reclaim our story, to speak about us...

And your choice to make the film in black and white? Was it in homage to *La Haine*?

There's a bit of that, but there is also an homage to Visconti, in particular *Rocco and his brothers* was a great source of inspiration. But that wasn't the main reason. Even back when I was writing the film, I already had imagined it in black and white. Fabien Coste, my manager, and I published two books illustrated with black and white photos: *La guerre des banlieues n'aura pas lieu* et *Le Dernier Français* [*The war of the ghettos will not take place and The Last Frenchman*]. We created an aesthetic that I wanted to pursue in the film. During the six-month long preparation period, we took photos of the places we intended to film, and when we were ready to shoot I already had the whole movie in images in my head.

And the choice of Pierre Aïm, the director of photography for *La Haine*?

When I spoke to the producers about the project, I showed them the photos I had taken and they suggested Pierre Aïm. They had been wanting to work with him again for quite a while. It's a coincidence that I embraced wholeheartedly! Pierre immediately understood where I wanted to go with it. I showed him the photos; I also spoke to him about *Rocco and his brothers*, *La Haine* and *Love without pity*. I'm fond of Eric Rochant's generational spirit in this story of a complicated love affair. I was really touched by the film when it came out, and I wanted to replicate this emotion.



And the music?

My older brother Bilal, who also composes the music to my songs, Laurent Garnier and Wallen worked on the music. All the music was composed before the film was made and I shot some scenes with the music in mind. The editor edited the film right along with the music. The harmonics evolved, indeed changed, but the rhythms didn't change an iota.

And the choice of your songs?

They represent the protagonist's success; the texts speak a great deal about his personal progression. Whether *Soldat de plomb* or *Gibraltar*, which tells the story of his trip towards the orient to find his inner compass.

There's also a lot of humor in the film...

I didn't start out telling myself that I was going to write comedy scenes, it's just that life is like that in the neighborhood: we tell jokes, we laugh and an hour later the buddy you were laughing with is dead. That's life.

How did you feel about making your first film?

It was my first feature film but I'd already directed music videos. I've been working in teams and crews for over twenty years. And that's despite the fact that musicians have even more exacting egos than actors! We were all happy to work together, it was a wonderful adventure. This movie is a declaration of love in many respects: to my mother, my wife, Naouale, my music, my brothers, my friends, my school, to my old neighborhood, and to France.

Interview by Claire Vassé



CAST

Régis / Abd Al Malik	MARC ZINGA
Nawel	SABRINA OUAZANI
Samir	LAROUCI DIDI
Mike	MICKAËL NAGENRAFT
Pascal	MATTEO FALKONE
Bilal	STÉPHANE FAYETTE-MIKANO
Miss Schaeffer	MIREILLE PERRIER
Rachid	ABDELMAJID « MICKEY » BARJA
The mother of Régis	FATOU-CLO
The cousin from Paris	SIMS FRANCIS MATULA
Pot de colle	ZESAU
Uncle Jean	MAXIME TSHIBANGU
The gangsta	GIANNI DONATO GIARDINELLI
The imam	KARIM BELKHADRA

CREW

Director	ABD AL MALIK
Screenwriter	ABD AL MALIK
From the novel	QU'ALLAH BENISSE LA FRANCE ! BY ABD AL MALIK ÉDITIONS ALBIN MICHEL
Cinematographer	PIERRE AÏM AFC
Sound	THOMAS LASCAR, THOMAS DESJONQUERES, DOMINIQUE GABORIEAU
Editor	KAKO KELBER
1st Assistant Director	OLIVIER GENET
Production Designer	MATHIEU MENUT
Costume Designer	HYAT LUSZPINSKI
Casting Director	NICOLAS LUBLIN
Production Manager	JEAN-FRANÇOIS COLSON
Script Supervisor	DIANE BRASSEUR
Original Music	BILAL, LAURENT GARNIER, WALLEN, ABD AL MALIK



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In association with **G!BALTAR FILMS, FRANCE 2 CINÉMA, AD VITAM**

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