

LES
MISÉRABLES
A FILM BY LADJ LY



SRAB FILMS PRESENTS



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LES MISÉRABLES

A FILM BY LADJ LY

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INTERNATIONAL SALES

WILD BUNCH

5 square Mérimée - 1st floor, Cannes

Phone : + 33 4 93 68 73 53

EVA DIEDERIX ediederix@wildbunch.eu

SILVIA SIMONUTTI ssimonutti@wildbunch.eu

FANNY OSTOJIC fostojic@wildbunch.eu

Press Kit and stills available on:

<https://www.wildbunch.biz/movie/les-miserables/>

INTERNATIONAL PRESS

DDA

DANA ARCHER

Lesmiserables@ddapr.com

M: +1 818 269 0128



SYNOPSIS

Stéphane (Damien Bonnard) has recently joined the Anti-Crime Squad in Montfermeil, in the suburbs of Paris, France, where, Victor Hugo set his famed novel "Les Misérables". Alongside his new colleagues Chris (Alexis Manenti) and Gwada (Djebril Zonga) - both experienced members of the team - he quickly discovers tensions running high between local gangs. When the trio finds themselves overrun during the course of an arrest, a drone captures the encounter, threatening to expose the reality of everyday life. Inspired by the 2005 Paris riots, and Ladj Ly's short film of the same name, *Les Misérables* is a provocative insight into the tensions between neighborhood residents and police.



INTERVIEW WITH LADJ LY DIRECTOR

Les Misérables is your first feature film, but you've been working in film for about 15 years.

How did you get started?

When I was eight or nine years old, I was friends with Kim Chapiron (French screenwriter and director). During the holidays he'd come to the activity club in Montfermeil - that's how we met. At the age of 15, he created a collective called Kourtrajmé, with directors Romain Gavras and Toumani Sangaré. I was 17 at the time, and it was the early days of digital, I bought my first camera and I've never stopped shooting since. I filmed everything. We learned everything as we went along. We were young and crazy. Today we might be a little less crazy, but you always have to keep a bit of madness. We don't want to be stuck inside a box, which is unfortunately sometimes the case in the world of cinema.

You've made web documentaries that drew a lot of attention, such as *365 Days in Clichy-Montfermeil* and *365 Days in Mali*. Can you describe these experiences?

I quickly gravitated to documentaries, with *365 Days in Clichy-Montfermeil*, which was shot during the 2005 riots. The riots erupted, right at the bottom of my building, and since I was always filming, I had about 100 hours of rushes. I had offers from the media to buy my images as they were the only ones with an insider's point of view. However, I decided not to sell anything and to make my own film. All our Kourtrajmé films were available for free on the Internet - we started doing that before YouTube or Dailymotion.

Some years later I made *365 Days in Mali* based on the same principles. The papers were saying that Mali had become the most dangerous place on earth because of Al Qaïda and the so-called Islamic State, however I knew the country well and it just didn't fit with the image conveyed by the media. I decided to go there and started filming haphazardly. I came home and proposed it to broadcasters, but none of them were prepared to show it as it was, so I put it on the Internet.



Then there came *Go Fast Connection* and *A Voix Haute*, co-directed with Stéphane de Freitas, which both received a lot of attention...

Go Fast is a docu-fiction made three years after the riots, where I broached the subject of the media's treatment of the suburbs. *A Voix Haute* was initially an indie project that France Television eventually joined. They gave us complete freedom: we shot it and they liked it - so much so that they offered to release it in theatres. This film shows that there's still hope in the suburbs, despite all the problems, that the people of these neighborhoods have talent and don't always fit with the clichés they're labelled with. This has always been my approach: to show the realities.

***Les Misérables* is your first classically produced feature film. Is it a culmination of all your experiences?**

I'm not sure it's a culmination. I hope it's more a departure than an arrival. But it is true that in this film I talk a little about my life, my experiences and those of my relatives. Everything in it is based on actual events: the jubilation of the World Cup victory of course, the arrival of the new cop in the neighborhood, the drone, even the stolen lion and the gypsies. For five years I filmed everything that went on in my neighborhood, particularly the cops. The minute they'd turn up, I'd grab my camera and film them, until the day I filmed a real police blunder. I wanted to show the incredible diversity of these neighborhoods. I still live there: it's my life and I love filming there. It's my set!

You tend to view all the protagonists without preconceptions or judgements?

Of course, because reality is always complex. There is bad and good on both sides. I try to film each character without judgement. We operate in such a complex world that it's difficult to make quick and definitive judgments. The neighborhoods are powder kegs, there are clans, and despite all this we all try to live together and to avoid everything spinning out of control. I show this in the film - the daily accommodations everyone makes to get by.





It seems everything happens against a backdrop of unemployment and poverty - the root of all the problems?

It's easy to live with each other when you have money. When you don't, it's a lot more complicated: you need compromises, arrangements, little deals... it's a matter of survival. For the cops too, they are in survival mode, things are tough for them too. *Les Misérables* is neither pro-lowlife nor pro-cops, I've tried to be as fair as possible. I was 10 years old when I was first stopped and searched by the police, which tells you how well I know cops, how long I've lived close by them. Most of these cops aren't well-educated - they themselves live in difficult conditions, and in the same neighborhood.

Could we call *Les Misérables* a humanist, political film, in the sense that you don't judge individuals but implicitly denounce a system in which everyone ends up being a victim, residents and cops alike?

That's exactly it, and responsibility falls to the politicians. You could almost say things are going from bad to worse. Despite everything, we've all learned to live together in these neighborhoods - with 30 different nationalities living side to side.

Life in the suburbs is light years away from what the media shows you. How could the politicians ever be able to bring solve our problems when they don't actually know us or how we live?





Another reality shown in the film, which contrasts with the usual clichés, is the depiction of ethnicities. Can you discuss?

Yes, because that is how things are. People from everywhere hanging out together. Between Chris - a white racist cop - and 'The Mayor' - a black neighborhood figure - things are also complex: they hate each other but have little "arrangements" because they need each other. The cops are often obliged to make compromises with the residents, or else it would be permanent war.

Your direction also goes against what's expected - you avoid video-promo editing, the stereotypical hip-hop music. Was it important for you to let the narrative and the shots speak for themselves?

I wanted the first forty minutes of the film to be a calm immersion into the neighborhood. I wanted to bring the audience into my world first, before going into the action. It's like you're strolling along, familiarising yourselves with the characters and the fabric of the neighborhood. Indeed, the music is more electro than hip-hop. Even the way they speak, I wanted to avoid all the predictable suburb-film clichés.





Let's talk about the actors. Where does Djibril Zonga (Gwada) come from?

He's a mate from Clichy-sous-Bois. He had a career as a model and I didn't know he was an actor. I was struggling to find a black guy - there aren't many black actors, apart from Omar Sy or Jacky Ido, you can count them on one hand. When he found out I was doing a casting, he called me. Not only did I not know he was an actor, he is also handsome, and I was looking more for someone with an ugly mug, to play the BAC cop. Still, I had him do some tests without too much expectation, and then, wow!

And Alexis Manenti, who plays the nasty racist cop, Chris?

I've known him for a long time - he's part of the Kourtrajmé gang. It's true his role isn't an easy one. His character is a real asshole, but he still has some humanity, which we also try to show. He's really good in this part, and despite his hateful side, the audience still grows attached to him.

Damien Bonnard is better known, and plays newcomer, Stéphane?

I didn't know him at all. Alexis had worked with him before and told me I should meet him. So I set up a meeting. He looked like he came from another planet, like in the film. He'd never been to the suburbs before - he was in shock! And you can see that on screen, he's absolutely accurate and touching. With him on board, I had my three cops. Then Steve, who plays the Mayor - I found him through casting, he'd already appeared in a lot of films. The others, I found on the street.

Then there's Jeanne Balibar, unrecognizable as the police chief, and unexpected in your film...

She was shooting her own film in Montfermeil. I didn't know her. Someone called me because she needed a hand and we became friends. I proposed the role to her, and she played the game. It was a beautiful encounter. It's true, it's surprising to see her in the film... no one expects to see her there.



**Julien Poupard is the cinematographer.
How did you work together?**

He immediately understood my world, the way I wanted to film. I've always been the camera operator on all my previous films, and I was a bit frustrated at first. But Julien is so good, and understood absolutely everything, so much so that it was like I was filming! What Julien did is magnificent. He is not only talented, he's humble, adorable - truly a beautiful encounter.

**What about the editing?
Did you have a lot of material to organise?**

Flora Volpière is an amazing editor. I shot a lot: we had about 100 hours of rushes. Flora has been working with Kourtrajmé for 20 years, she has edited all of Kim's films, she's killer - really something else.

The title refers to Victor Hugo, and the film begins with French flags during the night following the World Cup victory. Did you want to make a film not only about the suburbs, but about France too?

I'm French. At times we have been told that perhaps we weren't French, but we've always felt French. I'm a little older than the characters of the film, and the 12th of July, 1998 marked me for life. I remember it to this day - I was 18 and it was magical!

Football managed to unite us: no more skin colour, no more social classes, we were simply French. We felt that again during the last World Cup, as if only football had the power to bring us together. It's a pity there is no other bond for the people but at the same time, those are incredible moments to experience, and to film. The film starts with this, before shifting back to the bleaker reality of daily life, where each person lives their lives according to skin colour, religion, social class.



BIOGRAPHY LADJ LY

Filmmaker Ladj Ly is a native of Montfermeil (Seine-Saint-Denis), best known for his attention-grabbing web documentaries that depict the realities of social and political life. He began his career as an actor and member of Kourtrajmé, a collective created in 1995 by his childhood friends, directors Kim Chapiron and Romain Gavras.

Ly went on to direct his first short film, *Montfermeil Les Bosquets* in 1997. In 2004, he co-wrote the documentary *28 Millimeters* with renowned photographer JR, best known for his large format street photographs posted on the walls of Clichy, Montfermeil and Paris. After the 2005 Paris riots, Ladj was triggered by the death of two youths, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, who were hiding in an electricity substation in Clichy-sous-Bois, and he decided to film his neighborhood for a year

to make a documentary entitled *365 Days in Clichy-Montfermeil* (2007). He continued his work on documentaries, and in 2014 directed *365 Days In Mali*, which spotlighted a region in turmoil where militias and Tuaregs were preparing for war. In 2016, Ladj directed *Marakani* in Mali, an advert for the international solidarity NGO Max Havelaar France.

In 2017, he directed his first short film, *Les Misérables*, which was César-nominated in 2018 and a prize-winner at the Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Festival. That same year, he and director/writer Stéphane de Freitas co-directed the documentary *A Voix Haute*, also nominated for a César award. *Les Misérables* is Ly's first feature film, inspired by his original short.



FILMOGRAPHY

- 2019** **LES MISÉRABLES**
- 2017** **LES MISÉRABLES** (short)
César nominee 2018
À VOIX HAUTE (documentary)
co-directed with Stéphane de Freitas
- 2015** **CLIQUE TV** (TV)
Documentary filmmaking for Clique TV
MR BRAINWASH (web series documentary for Arte)
- 2013** **365 DAYS IN MALI** (documentary)
- 2010** **MALI SUR LA TRACE DES OTAGES FRANCAIS** (documentary TV)
- 2008** **DES MAUX POUR LE DIRE** (TV report)
- 2007** **365 DAYS IN CLICHY MONTFERMEIL** (documentary)
- 2006** **28 MILLIMETERS: PORTRAIT OF A GENERATION** (documentary)
co-directed with JR
- 1997** **MONTFERMEIL LES BOSQUETS** (short)
with Kourtrajmé collective



CAST

Stéphane/Greaser	Damien Bonnard
Chris	Alexis Manenti
Gwada	Djebril Zonga
Issa	Issa Perica
Buzz	Al-Hassan Ly
The Mayor	Steve Tientcheu
Salah	Almamy Kanoute
Cheapskate	Nizar Ben Fatma
Zorro	Raymond Lopez
Luciano	Luciano Lopez
Jaihson	Jaihson Lopez
Police Chief	Jeanne Balibar
Macha	Omar Soumare
Bintou	Sana Joachaim
Slim	Lucas Omiri

CREW

Directed by	Ladj Ly	Producers	Toufik Ayadi
Written by	Ladj Ly		Christophe Barral
	Giordano Gederlini		
	Alexis Manenti	Production	SRAB Films
Original Music	Pink Noise	Coproduction	Rectangle Productions
DP	Julien Poupard		Lyly Films
Sound	Arnaud Lavaleix	With the participation of	Canal +
	Matthieu Autin		Ciné +
	Jérôme Gonthier		Le Pacte
	Marco Casanova		Wild Bunch
Editor	Flora Volpelière	With the support of	La Région Île-de-France
1st Assistant Director	Arthur Guerrand	In association with	Cinéventure 4
Production Designer	Karim Lagati		Cinefeel 4
Wardrobe	Marine Galliano	French Distribution	Le Pacte
Production Manager	Laurène Ladoge	International Sales	Wild Bunch

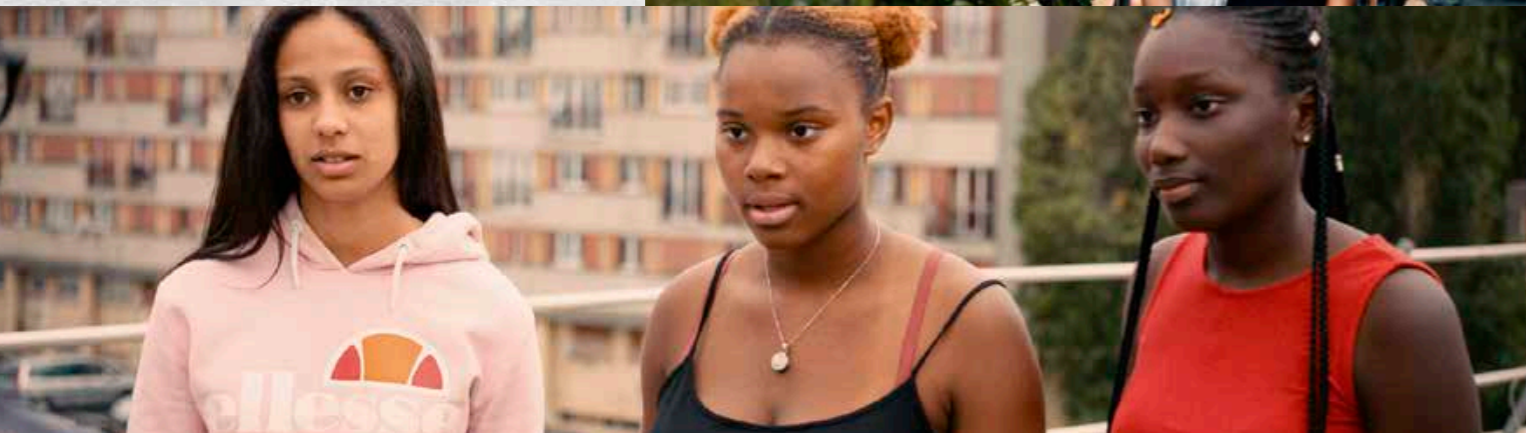
**THE ANTI-CRIME
SQUAD**



THE BUGS



**THE HIGH-SCHOOL
GIRLS**



THE GYPSIES



THE MAYOR



**THE MUSLIM
BROTHERHOOD**



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Le Pacte