

HABIB ATTIA AND MARC IRMER PRESENT



MOSTRA INTERNAZIONALE
D'ARTE CINEMATOGRAFICA
LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA 2019
Official Selection

**SAMI
BOUJILA**

**NAJLA
BEN ABDALLAH**

بيک نعيش
**a
son**

A FILM BY **MEHDI M. BARSAOUI**

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A FILM BY
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96 min - Tunisia, France, Lebanon, Qatar - DCP - 2.39 – 5.1 - 2019

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SYNOPSIS

Tunisia, summer 2011.

The holiday to Southern country ends in disaster for Fares, Meriem and their 10-year old son Aziz when he is accidentally shot in an ambush.

His injury will change their lives as Aziz needs a liver transplant, which leads to the discovery of a long-buried secret. Will Aziz and their relationship survive?



INTERVIEW WITH MEHDI M. BARSAOUI

You start the film with a wonderful scene of the closeness between Fares and his son, Aziz. It doesn't hint at what is to come, but rather expresses their fusional relationship.

It was primordial to start the film like that. The opening shots had to show that the bond between father and son was extremely strong. I film the hands of the father and his son on the steering wheel like a kind of line around which the entire film will develop. This idea of the child steering is also symbolic. He holds the reins, and it's he who will plunge us into the family's past.

A SON is a drama about filiation that you have chosen to set in 2011. What were the reasons for that?

In Tunisia, both politically and socially, 2011 was a watershed year. We are in August and September, seven months after the revolution. For me it was important to set the story in this precise period because it allowed me to give the story a social and historical context. From the start I had no pretense to talk about the revolution. I have neither the credentials nor the means to do so. I'm neither a historian nor a political scientist. What interested me were the repercussions of political life on a normal-looking family. And that is the reason why my story takes place a few months after the fall of Ben Ali, and a few weeks before that of Gaddafi, who will be killed in October. Many things are changing in that part of the world, and I wanted my characters to be situated in that precise moment. Yet at the same time, I wanted it to remain under the surface.

How so?

The political context never invades the intimate and personal sphere of the film. Those events influence how the story develops, but the storyline remains focused on the drama gripping the family. At the beginning of the story, before the ambush, we sense that the family is well protected. They move from one cocoon to another. There's the cocoon of their social life, with their friends, and then the cocoon of their car, a Range Rover that costs a fortune in Tunisia – and then their hotel, their room... That's why when the shooting starts, an element that is both a trigger and shock, I chose to show the car window shattering. For me it symbolizes the relationship that Fares and Meriem have with reality – their country and the world around them. The personal sphere is invaded, and the protective barrier is stripped.

How did you develop the script? What was the starting point?

Whether intentionally or not, to some extent you always draw on your own life. I'm convinced that in every story there's a bit of the author. My parents divorced when I was very young. Afterwards I lived with my mother and two brothers from a previous marriage, and I always wondered what it would be like to have a father, what the difference is between a brother and half-brother, the question of filiation and blood ties... And when I was growing up I started thinking about those blood ties that link family members. How do you define a parent? What does parenting consist of?

Does the reproduction of a genetic sequence make a parent of us? Those questions may have been the seed for this script.

The film is a melodrama, a marital drama and a political film, all at once. How did you articulate these different textures?

The script was developed over a period of close to four years, with different periods of writing. Since this is my first feature, I participated in several screenwriting workshops to hone my technique. Each time I worked on the different layers. So I'd concentrate on the main story line, then work on the secondary elements before trying to flesh out the story's context by grafting on the political backdrop, and then finally I'd consider the more personal story involving the couple. While keeping in mind that the film isn't only about paternity, but also maternity and adultery. At a certain point I felt slightly disoriented, and that's when I decided to bring in Magali Negroni as a script consultant. She was a huge support, because she really helped me recenter the story's foundations. And to ensure that the drama doesn't drift into melodrama, and that the pathos doesn't take the upper hand.

The screenplay is structured around several marked ellipses, such as the scenes where Meriem confesses to Fares, or when Fares goes to see Aziz's biological father.



The ellipses were part of the screenplay from the beginning. When Meriem confesses to her husband, we already know what she is going to tell him. So the repetition would be superfluous, and redundant. I like narrative ellipses in general because I think they allow the viewer to remain engaged.

But you run the risk that in the eyes of the viewer, Meriem cannot “defend” herself.

That’s true. But it’s a risk I decided to take. It allowed me to give greater heft to the relationship that the couple has during the rest of the film. In the sense that their story continues to evolve. It’s by means of small details and events hinted at in the script that we slowly begin to piece together what had taken place a few years before. This enabled us to construct the story as a crescendo.

Above all, I did not want to give everything away from the start. It wasn’t about holding back emotion, but by withholding certain elements, I was able to flesh out the couple and their past. Like the scene where Fares tells Meriem that that’s how she took revenge for his infidelity. Is it important to know at that precise moment the reasons behind the woman’s adultery? I don’t think so. On the other hand, what’s most important is to see how the ego of the father takes the upper hand over the ego of the husband. While writing the script, the hardest balance to find was always precisely the one between the ego of this man, who has been hurt, betrayed, and the ego of the father. While writing the screenplay, whenever I was facing a decision about the male protagonist, I always asked myself who is speaking, the man or the father? And that is how I’d solve problems with the script.

You choose an open ending, which is both very coherent with the film’s elliptical structure and which above all gives free choice to both your protagonists and your viewers...

That was what we wanted. To replay the film again, with the stretchers passing by, the extras we’ve seen in different scenes, the policemen and hospital staff, the woman in the burqa... And the idea was precisely to allow the two protagonists to decide their future. They’ve freed themselves from the past and all that it entailed in terms of wounds and things that had been left unspoken. Now it’s up to them to write their future. Will they get back together or not? I have my answer, but I leave it up to the viewers to decide for themselves.

Very often you film from the mother’s POV, much less frequently from the father’s.

The dictators whom we had in Tunisia at a certain point assumed the function of the father. By ousting Ben Ali, in a certain sense – psychoanalytically, for instance – we killed the father. The relationship to the father in Arab countries is unquestio-

nably unusual, not to say strange. The film is definitely about paternity, but also the maternal aspect of filiation, about love and about female adultery – a subject that has not been treated often in Arab cinema.

Meriem is a magnificent character whom you shield from moral judgment.

I did not want this adulterous woman to be seen negatively. That was the one of the main goals in writing the script, because I wanted neither to condemn nor to judge her. And that’s why I wrote the scene where she offers to turn herself in. A sacrifice that, to me, places her as an equal with her husband. And it’s not inconsequential, because in Tunisia, adultery is punishable by five years in jail without parole.

Fares could easily have gone to the police and filed charges against his wife, who would have been sent to jail, along with her lover. Especially as in this story, there’s tangible proof – the child. It’s a defining scene for Meriem, who comes out of it transformed, even in Fares’s eyes. The scene restructures the ending, because in it Meriem’s character undergoes a real shift.

There’s the wonderful line when she lashes at Fares, “Is that how modern you are?”

With that line, Meriem dares to stand up to her husband. The couple see themselves as free. They drink, they have friends who tell dirty jokes – a woman, no less. The women smoke, they’re active professionally. I wanted to question the idea of modernity. What does it mean to be modern? How far can we go in the Arab world? Meriem and Fares form a couple that has an enviable financial and social situation. We infer that he has lived abroad and chosen to return to Tunisia. He’s a man who is open to the world, to the West. And in the face of this drama, modernity, especially the man’s, shows its limits. Can a modern man accept that his wife has been unfaithful? That she has had a child with someone else, openly and publicly. For me, the answer is clearly yes. That’s why when they look at each other at the end of the film, I suggest the notion that they had to reach that stage to truly decide to start over. It’s also a film about second chances and forgiveness.

The directing is always factual, focused on the events, without embellishment.

If there’s a word that I hope sums up the film, it’s sobriety. In the sense that I always sought, whether in the editing, score, lighting, framing or acting, to remain in reality. In something visceral, organic. And to avoid resorting to artifices. That’s why there are no crane or dolly shots, no sweeping camera movements – in short, nothing artificial. I wanted a handheld camera that stays close to the characters, runs with them and feels their pain. To be focused and centered on them was a choice I made from the beginning. Even for landscapes. I didn’t want any aestheticizing.



Whether for the desert or the pain. The characters were strong enough already; if we'd overloaded them with the directing, we would've gone straight into the pathos that I wanted at all cost to avoid.

You often film in close-up, which, combined with the CinemaScope ratio, amplifies your protagonists' distress.

From the start I wanted to shoot in Scope, and we finalized the choice when I went location scouting with my DOP, Antoine Héberlé. I thought that Scope would allow me to isolate my characters even more. It's a format that lets you include parts of the surroundings and location to create perspectives that isolate your characters a bit more. The choice started out as theoretical, but it proved itself when I understood that it allowed me to portray the situation and solitude of my characters through the framing, without resorting to more elaborate directorial means.

Tell us about your desire to work with Sami Bouajila...

I had him in mind from the very beginning. Sami has so much charisma, he's the embodiment of the reassuring man. The character he plays is successful, he speaks well, he doesn't keep his wife under tight rein, he's not jealous of her success – on the contrary, he's proud of it. He's a good guy in every way. But as soon as drama looms, his weaknesses come out. And Sami is such a versatile actor, he's a chameleon. You can't pigeonhole him. Is he a good guy? A bad guy? I like actors like him. He was really invested in the part. From the moment we started read throughs, and during our preparation together, I got to know him. He's at ease with his fragility and doesn't try to hide it. He's authentic and honest. He was perfect for Fares.

And Najla Ben Abdallah, who plays Meriem?

She had a bit less experience. She'd done a little television, which had given her some recognition in Tunisia. I chose her after a casting process that was quite long, since it lasted almost seven months. I have to say that I hate classic auditions where you ask an actor to play a scene from the film on camera. I didn't even want to work with a casting director, I did it all myself. Of course, I met with a huge number of candidates. I would quickly explain the story to them, tell them a bit about the character, but rather than have them act out a scene from the script – which always leaves me disappointed, since usually you don't find the right energy and rhythm – I asked them to play a scene that I'd completely invented, where I played the husband and she the wife. Without any preparation. It was all in the moment. And it was filmed. Najla's screen test lasted seventeen minutes, and during that time, I saw all the facets of the character. I saw her cry, scream, stand mute, distraught... In short, I saw Meriem.





MEHDI M. BARSAOUI

BIO

Born in 1984 and raised in Tunisia, Mehdi M. Barsaoui is a graduate of the Higher Institute of Multimedia Arts of Tunis and holds a degree in film direction from DAMS in Bologna, Italy. He has directed three short-films to date. His most recent, *WE'RE JUST FINE LIKE THIS*, won the Golden Muhr for Best Film in Dubai in 2016. His international career begins with *A SON*, his debut feature-length film, selected at the 76th Venice International Film Festival.

FILMOGRAPHY

- 2019 **A SON**
Feature length
- 2016 **WE'RE JUST FINE LIKE THIS**
Short film
- 2013 **BOBBY**
Short film
- 2010 **SIDEWAYS**
Short film



SAMI BOUAJILA

BIO

Sami Bouajila was born in 1966 and raised near Grenoble, France. He first-starred in Abdellatif Kechiche's first feature-film, POLITICAL REFUGEE, before he was revealed to a broader audience with DAYS OF GLORY, for which he won the Award for Best Actor at 2006 Cannes Film Festival along with his co-stars (Jamel Debbouze, Samy Naceri, Roschdy Zem, Bernard Blancan). In 2008, he won the Cesar Award for Best Supporting Actor for THE WITNESSES, by André Téchiné. He was then featured in OMAR KILLED ME (2011), which deals with the Omar Raddad court case.



NAJLA BEN ABDALLAH

BIO

Najla Ben Abdallah was born in Tunis, Tunisia in 1980. She starts her acting carrier in 2010 by shooting local TV shows that will have a successful run. In 2015, she's featured in the Tunisian film THALA, MY LOVE by Mehdi Hmili. In 2019, she's cast alongside Sami Bouajila in Mehdi M. Barsaoui's A SON world premiering at the 76th Venice Film Festival.

CAST

Fares	Sami Bouajila
Meriem	Najla Ben Abdallah
Aziz	Youssef Khemiri
Dr. Dhaoui	Noomen Hamda
D108	Qasim Rawane
The Businessman	Slah Msaddak
Sami	Mohamed Ali Ben Jemaa

CREW

Written and directed by
Mehdi M. Barsaoui

Photography
Antoine Héberlé (a.f.c)

Sound
Lucas Héberlé, Romain Huonnic, Cyprien Vidal, Elory Humez

Editing
Camille Toubkis

Music
Amine Bouhafa

Art direction
Sophie Abdelkefi

Costume Design
Randa Khedher

Make-up and hair
Mouna Ben Abda, Najoua Bouzid

First Assistant Director
Salem Daldoul

Production manager
Khaled W. Barsaoui

Continuity
Emna Bouyahya

Producers
Habib Attia, Marc Irmer, Chantal Fischer

Coproducers
**Cyrille Perez, Gilles Perez, Etienne Ollagnier, Sarah Chazelle, Anas Azrak,
Faycal Hassairi, Georges Schoucair, Myriam Sassine, Antoine Khalife**

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