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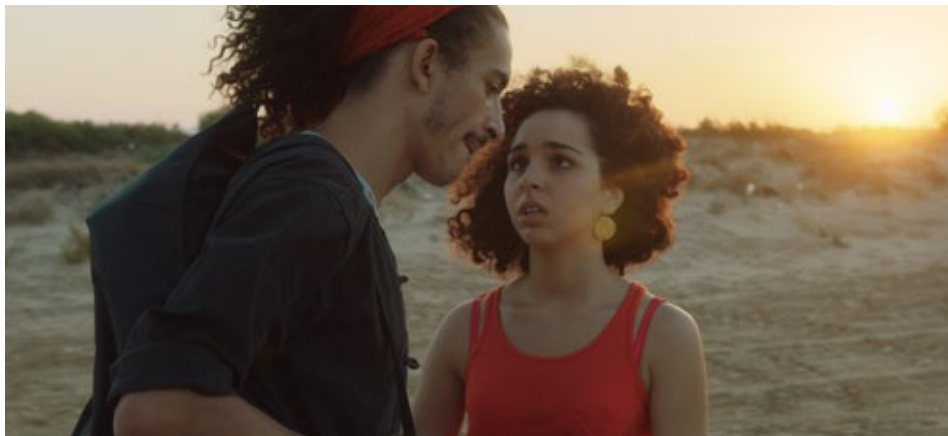
UN FILM DE
LEYLA BOUZID

AVEC
BAYA MEDHAFFAR
GHALIA BENALI

CREDITS NON-CONTRACTUAL

INTERVIEW

with LEYLA BOUZID



The film takes place when Ben Ali was President, but was written and shot a long time after he fled the country. How has your work changed in relation to the historical and key events that have recently occurred in Tunisia?

When the revolution happened, the desire was very strong to film and represent it. Many documentaries were shot then, all full of hope, all focused on the future. I, too, really wanted to film. Not the revolution, but what everyone had lived through and been subjected to: the suffocating everyday life, the total power of the police, the surveillance, the fear and paranoia of the Tunisian people over the past 23 years.

The revolution (or revolts, points of view are divergent) surprised the entire world, but it didn't come from nowhere. We couldn't just all of a sudden sweep away decades of dictatorship and turn towards the future without examining the past. For me it was obvious that we had to quickly review the past while the tide of freedom continued to flow.

Like most Tunisians, my euphoria was strong at first, followed by successive phases of enchantment and disenchantment. For the film, I didn't want the range of emotions linked to ongoing events to influence me. My only guide was trying to consistently follow the emotional journey traveled by the characters during

the historical period being told. The goal was to be as accurate as possible in a work of fiction anchored in a specific historical context.

Were you aware of the renewed restrictions on freedom during the shoot? Were you afraid of seeing the Ben Ali era come back to life in the eye of your camera?

I was above all aware that I had to shoot the film quickly, while there was still time, and that it was important to film the fear the Tunisians felt when Ben Ali was in power. To memorize the difficulties of those years that we never wanted to see again, to conjure away the risk of seeing them come racing back. During the shoot I noticed that many had already forgotten what it was like to live

under Ben Ali. When I told the extras: “here there’s a heavy silence” because under Ben Ali one couldn’t hear such things without being afraid, some of them had a hard time trying to recompose the feeling. People had lost the reflexes they had had during that period, along with the memory of the fear and paranoia. From a certain standpoint, forgetting is not necessarily a bad thing. As if that period was really behind us. But amnesia and forgetting must be fought. That’s one of the roles of cinema.

You speak of fears in relation to the police system, but there is also a real terrorist threat looming over Tunisia. And yet religion is completely absent from the film.

We’re with young people who bubble over with energy, who do things, who want to make music, organize concerts, live their





art. Religion is not in the center of their lives. It's this energetic and creative youth who I wanted to film. Youth who fight everyday for their existence even, and who we rarely hear anything about. The only young people given a voice in the media are those who turn to extremism and violence. It seemed important to me to say that there are also young people who are driven by life, to give them a voice via Farah, show that she is muzzled by a terror that emanates from the system. Terrorism is not the only form of terror.

Farah is trying to exist as an individual, to have her voice heard. We know "The Tunisian people", the "We", the "Nation"... But what place is given to "I"? At what price does one exist as a free individual in Tunisia? Did you have to pay that price? What is there of you in Farah?

The film asks this question: how can one, in Tunisia, break free from family, from society, from the system? -- the energy that this requires, the resistance that it provokes and the violence that it can generate are tremendous. We follow the trajectory of Farah, who wants to live life to the fullest, who is fully alive, against all odds and everyone, and for that she is punished, crushed.

I think that in Tunisia, we all pay a price, whether one is an artist or not, at one time or another in one's life, at an intimate, familial, social or educational level. In Tunisian society, either one makes concessions, or one is confronted with countless obstacles.

The story of the film is not autobiographical, even if there are a few situations that I myself lived through: that of discovering that a close friend, who belonged to the

same cinema club as I, was a police informer. Someone who was there to watch us, to infiltrate us. That was a terrible shock; I realized then to what extent we were encircled and that we couldn't trust anything or anyone. But Farah is very different from me. She is more impulsive and spontaneous than I

her to play the part of a singer's mother. At first she was almost offended. But finally when she read the script, she was very enthusiastic. In the character of Hayet she saw things that reminded her of her own mother, and was excited to play the role. Ghalia's presence brought a lot to the film: she was a great help to Baya. They bonded



am, I would never have been capable of going as far as she does. She is graced by a kind of innocence and courage, she hasn't integrated the limits that block any initiative; she's like a free electron.

You chose the singer Ghalia Ben Ali to play the role of the mother, and gave Baya Medhaffer her first role, that of the heroine. How did the two actresses react to this choice?

Ghalia was very surprised that I contacted

beautifully together and developed a rhythm of their own.

The last scene in the film is in fact inspired by the first meeting of the two actresses. Ghalia sang to encourage Baya to sing in her presence. Little by little, Baya started singing with Ghalia. This touched Ghalia so that tears started running down her cheeks while she smiled. It was very intense and suddenly, it was obvious that this was the end of the film.

To play the part of Farah, I needed a young girl of 18, very free, ready and

able to embody the role, which required both singing and playing. It's a tough part for a novice. The casting lasted over a year, I met many, many girls, some of them many times. Baya took the screen test early on, but I wasn't sure, I was riddled with doubt. The choice was difficult and Baya really fought to

mining area, where the dusty decors break from the turbulent urban setting.

There's a barrier that separates these two settings that I feel must be broken, and that it's possible for me to do it. Concretely, during the shoot, it's the scene where Hayet enters the bar that was the



get the role. She absolutely wanted it; she loved the character and was not afraid of being censored or of doing something forbidden. She is, in fact, more free than Farah, more explosive. She is exceptionally free. This was very precious for embodying the role and it's what convinced me.

You film the rough areas of Tunis, its nightlife, and namely the bars, the trains, very masculine places, which you enter with the eyes of a woman... Then you go into the country, and primarily to the

most delicate. The extras were real clients of a seedy bar. Each time we redid the scene, the actress had to enter the bar again and each time it was an ordeal. The men, extras that they were, ogled her with insistence, quasi-obscenely, without our asking. All the women participating in the shoot felt the pressure of their look.

I was determined to film Tunisian places with their real atmospheres, the real persons who work or go there, to be faithful to their reality. The suburban train, the bars, the bus station are filmed

in documentary fashion. The idea was to inject the fiction of the film into these terribly alive, teeming places of the city... right up to the dusty phosphate mines, the hotbed of resistance when Ben Ali was in power. The workers play their proper role. This scene creates a break in the film, allowing for taking a step back in relation to the story, a kind of zoom backwards that attempts to draw a map of the country. To remember that the words of the songs come from afar, that the impression of suffocating is deep, buried beneath several social strata. The scene is a tribute to these workers (still in conflict with the authorities today), first of all to evoke their resistance, which prepared the country to rise up against the government. Resistance started early, in 2008, long before Bouazizi's now famous attempt to immolate himself.

The music in the film is the vector for a kind of resistance. Khyam Allami, an Iraqi, composed it.

Music and dance are releases that have always existed in popular Tunisian culture. The traditional music, "Mezwed", the dances, the festivities during marriages are truly intense occasions, allowing emotional release for the people. Today, Tunisian rap is emerging from the poor districts. It is a real refuge for some, and manifests a strong resistance movement that reaches a great many. The State is visibly very afraid of these rapper-

protestors since it fights and arrests them for what they cry out in their songs.

The music was the biggest challenge of the film. Not only did I have to find an actress who sings, but I needed to create a band, compose the music, write the songs. Sometimes I thought it would be impossible. I met countless musicians, but we never succeeded in getting along.

And then one day by chance I was at a concert in Paris and I discovered a band whose music simply took me away: the Alif Ensemble. Khyam is one of five musicians from various Arabic countries (Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine, Iraq). His energy, his training is very close to what I wanted. (Their first album will be available September 4th, 2015)

And I also discovered that the band's stringed-instrument maker is Iraqi, and that he had lived in Tunisia for the past three years. He spoke Tunisian, knew the places where I wanted to shoot the film, the underground life of the youth there, Baya... Everything went really fast and was really simple after that. Khyam and I were completely in tune; I consulted him when I did the casting, we created the band together. He composed the songs for Baya's voice and rehearsed the band for weeks before the shooting even started. That brought them together; they became a real band. We all loved the music. Filming the musical scenes with the live performance of the band were real moments of exaltation for the entire film crew.

For the lyrics I worked with an old friend

of mine, Ghassen Amami, who also works in cinema. Each song had to procure a specific feeling in relation to the moment it was sung in the film; each participates in the dramaturgy. Some of the songs were written in one go, others required reworking several times. The lyrics are deeply rooted in the Tunisia of today.

Your film is going to be projected at the Venice Film Festival. Few Arabic films have achieved this. And it is extremely rare in Tunisia to shoot one's first feature film at age 30: via Farah, it's the youth of the entire country who are invited with you to Venice.

I am very happy and proud of having been selected. It's true that I think it's too bad that the visibility of Arabic cinema isn't greater. But what's important is that it comes from our countries and is something other than religious extremism; it allows others to discover those who resist, who dream, who

create, to reveal that there are other voices, other possible references... I hope that being part of the Venice Festival will give the film greater visibility, and will provide people with the opportunity to discover a Tunisia they don't know, allow them to better grasp what happened and why it happened.

At the same time I'm impatient to show the film in my own country. I'm curious to see what it will stir up – a few controversies probably, but I hope above all that it reaches a young public, who can't always identify with Tunisian film. I turned thirty the day after the shooting was over; I think the film talks about my generation. It's true that it's pretty rare in Tunisia to make a feature film at a young age. But there are many other films of young directors currently in preparation or in post-production; I think that our cinema is in the process of renewing itself.

By Mhaa Ben Abdeladhim, Journalist and writer, Paris July 2015



CAST

FARAH BAYA MEDHAFFER
HAYET GHALIA BENALI
BORHÈNE MONTASSAR AYARI
ALI AYMEN OMRANI
MAHMOUD LASSAAD JAMOUSI
INÈS DEENA ABDELWAHED
SKA YOUSSEF SOLTANA
SAMI MARWEN SOLTANA
AHLEM NAJOUA MATHLOUTHI
MONCEF YOUNESS FERHI
"JGHAL", LE POÈTE DU BAR FATHI AKKERI
HAMIDA SALOUA MOHAMMED

CREW

DIRECTOR LEYLA BOUZID
PRODUCERS SANDRA DA FONSECA AND IMED MARZOUK
SCRIPT LEYLA BOUZID ET MARIE-SOPHIE CHAMBON
ORIGINAL SCORE KHYAM ALLAMI
PHOTOGRAPHY SÉBASTIEN GOEPFERT
EDITING LILIAN CORBEILLE
SOUND LUDOVIC VAN PACHTERBEKE
SOUND MIXING RÉMI GÉRARD
COPRODUCTION ANTHONY REY
ASSOCIATED PRODUCERS NATHALIE MESURET AND BERTRAND GORE
PRODUCTION BLUE MONDAY PRODUCTIONS AND PROPAGANDA PRODUCTION
COPRODUCTION HÉLICOTRONC
FRENCH DISTRIBUTION SHELLAC

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BLUE MONDAY PRODUCTIONS - PROPAGANDA PRODUCTIONS - HELICOTRONC PRESENT

AS I OPEN MY EYES

A FILM BY LEYLA BOUZID

WITH BAYA MEDHAFFAR GHALIA BEN ALI MONTASSAR AYARI
AYMEN OMRANI LASSAAD JAMOSSI

Tunis, summer 2010, a few months before the Revolution: Farah, 18 years-old, has just graduated and her family already sees her as a future doctor. But she doesn't think the same way. She sings in a political rock band. She has a passion for life, gets drunk, discovers love and her city by night against the will of her mother Hayet, who knows Tunisia and its dangers too well.

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CREDITS NON-CONTRACTUAL

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