

EVERYBODY ON DECK  
PRESENTS

# CORNICHE KENNEDY

A FILM BY  
DOMINIQUE CABRERA

BASED ON THE NOVEL BY  
MAYLIS DE KERANGAL





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France - 2016 - Fiction - 1h34



## SYNOPSIS

In the space of one summer, a group of idle teens attempt to defy the laws of gravity by diving along the Kennedy cliff near Marseille. When the path of a narcotics agent assigned to a local case crosses theirs, she tries to bring them under her wing and prevent them from risking their lives. Between their insatiable taste for freedom and everything that is forbidden and the captain's lonely, disillusioned lifestyle, a fragile future begins to take shape.

## INTERVIEW WITH DOMINIQUE CABRERA



### **What compelled you to adapt Maylis De Kerangal's novel Corniche Kennedy?**

For a long time, I wanted to make a film in Marseille, a city that I truly love. I visit Marseille often, and I have for many years. I am French, and I was born in Algeria before its independence. What touches me the most about Marseille is its resonance with Algeria. It is like a mirror to Alger, which is right across the Mediterranean Sea. I like the vibe of the city, its working class and seaside culture, its social and ethnic diversity. Marseille inspires me. I like to imagine the stories of those who have passed through the city and dream of the myths surrounding its streets. In searching for stories, I read many novels that took place there, and "Corniche Kennedy" just gripped me.

### **Beyond Marseille, what did you like about this book.**

First off, Maylis de Kerangal's perspective on "the kids of the Corniche" and this unique setting by the sea. I felt a special connection with her writing, blending detailed documentary, its poetic openness and mythological dimension. I began to envision how I would stage this novel, with the sky and the sea as background, a unique scenery to magnify its heroes, this youth of the city's working-class neighborhoods.

### **How did you write the script?**

I moved to Marseille, wanting to spend more time there, walked around the city, the Corniche, and took pictures. One of my goals was to find the onsite locations for the film. All the places described in the book are fictional. I met and spoke with folks in the area, connected with local organizations and, of course, I wanted to find the youth who jump off the cliffs. One day, from a distance I saw this band of young people, gathered exactly in the spot where I pictured staging the film. I got closer so that I could photograph them. They seemed wary and reticent at first, but soon warmed up to me. Somehow, we hit it off, and I saw them again soon after this first encounter. I made it clear from the get-go that this was not a casting in disguise. We spoke about the novel, my desire to be truthful to the story. One of them told me: "We got what you are looking for, we can help you," and that is exactly what they did. I learned more about them, they helped me with finding places for the dives and we talked about how to blend my storyline with their words... In time, they read the book, and they helped me work through some of the dialogues and parts from my original script. There were four or five of them, including Alain and Kamel who ended up playing Mehdi and Marco in the movie.

### **Why did you eventually offer them the role in the film?**

We formed a close bond, full of mutual care, respect, and honesty as we worked closely together and spent time getting to know each other. Talent blossoms if nurtured and encouraged. Over time, my project morphed into theirs, and it started to make sense for them to be part of it as actors as well. We inspired each other to make this possible. In the beginning, Alain told me: "I won't play in your movie. I am dyslexic, I am just an idiot. I will do all the jumps you want but that's it." Then, I looked at his shots, listened to his voice and was totally moved by him. During the first audition with Lola Creton, who plays Suzanne, he was so intimidated that you could barely hear him, but he had such a transpiring presence, a mix of heroism and childish stubbornness. Alain is a poet, a rare and exquisite diamond. He lives his life as if he were the hero of adventure and epic books.

Kamel, on the other hand, exuded charm and was acutely smart about relationships. He has a natural self-awareness; He is like a dancer listening to the beat, and he is actually a musician and writes songs. He understood right away how to fit into the movie, where to stand, his role in the story. It was just a matter of guiding him to go beyond being just natural and to show his openness.

### **How did you find the other younger actors to play in the film?**

Ever since casting mineworkers in supporting roles for “Nadia and the hippopotamus,” I have wanted to make an entire movie with nonprofessional actors. “Corniche Kennedy” was the perfect opportunity to try that out as it made more sense to work with young local divers on acting the parts than with professional actors and teach them how to jump and speak the Marseille slang. Having said that, we still needed to find the youth. Bania Medjbar, my casting director took that on, scouting around the seaside for them and eventually we had a group of teenagers, and we started an acting workshop with them. It was an amazing experience, and I was blown away by its intensity and how it brought us together in a such a positive way. It took a lot of work, we had many crises and moments of doubt, but it was also magical and rewarding.

### **Why did you pick Lola Creton, a professional actress for the role of Suzanne, the young woman from the affluent neighborhood?**

My original thought was to find and pick an amateur for the role, but it just didn't click for this part with any of the wonderful young women Bania had suggested. Then the idea of casting Lola Creton came to me. She had impressed me in “L'amour de jeunesse” from Mia Hansen-Love, and I thought that her different geographic and social background would actually benefit us in making the movie. I remember thinking when she showed up for the audition: “She will never be interested in being part of this small-budget film, working with young townies from Marseille.» I took her to the Corniche, and we walked along the coastline. I knew at that point, watching her in that incredible setting, that she understood the project and would want to be part of it.

### **The entire movie is filmed outdoors, primarily on the Corniche, leaving “off-camera” the social class differences among the protagonists which nevertheless are an important component of the film**

This is very much in line with how the novel was written, and I wanted to go a step further in my film. The natural beauty of their surroundings, the sky and the sea truly dignify our heroes. The question of social classes is obviously central to the film, but it does not transpire through the scenery or in the dialogues but rather in the events that take place. The beautiful and natural landscape is within their reach, unrestricted, and it transcends them. What a wonderful treasure for this city and its people to be located by the seaside, especially when this amazing landscape is filmed and highlighted by the cinema.



I wanted to stage these young people with all of their might, beauty, grace, strength, poetry and freedom. They are 20 years old with limitless possibilities. Regrettably, organized crime is one choice they have as well in this city. But what matters is that all is possible, even for Suzanne who can choose to leave with Marco to Italy, freeing herself from her social bounds. The young actors also surpassed themselves during the making of the film. Their creativity enabled them to act the part, interpret the script, jump off cliffs in frigid water and 15-degree (Celsius) temperatures while pretending it was summertime. Lola also showed amazing creativity in her acting. Having been a child actress since age 13, her experience and natural inclination has been primarily interpreting, not so much improvising, and there she was, working with amateurs in a totally different dynamic.

### **How did she approach the role and the filming?**

They were all about the same age to start with, which greatly helped. From the first take on, she slipped right into the story with precision and presence. Lola impressed me so much with her ability to be completely at ease in her acting, so unpretentious, like the girl next door. She worked hard in developing personal rapport with everyone in the film, kindly guiding them at times. It is worth mentioning that they had trained a great deal and made huge progress by the time we started filming. It was good to see as well, how their athletic skills helped create a balance with Lola in their rapport.



### **The diving scenes are essential in the filming of the movie, far more than just a background for the plot.**

The jumps are indeed a core element to the film. These kids are dropouts, ignored and socially marginalized. The Corniche is their domain, diving off the cliffs is their opportunity to shine, the one thing they truly excel at. Don't forget that this is a very dangerous activity. We spent a great deal of time and effort, consulting with diving champion Lionel Franc to train our actors, to ensure safety in preparation for the scenes. When it was finally time to start shooting, we were told: "Out of the question! Jumping off the cliffs is illegal and can't be authorized. Go ahead with the act-playing as you see fit, but please do the dives in Cassis, not Marseille." We waited for the very end of the filming, in mid-October and snuck through all the diving scenes in three days in freezing water.

### **What do you make of these youths' risk-taking behavior and urge to jump so dangerously?**

There is this incredible moment of euphoria you experience between jumping and entering the water. The young divers know the risk, but they overcome it.



Surpassing the anxiety and the fear of death give them a one-of-a-kind burst of adrenaline. The urge to take risks affirms their desire to live, an action-driven life. Why does danger and challenge appeal to us? Because they are an inherent part of life, especially for these youngsters with their social background. Metaphorically, jumping, taking a plunge, is a way to research and experiment what choices we make and what life we aspire to. Propelling ourselves into physical space is akin to moving forward in life.

### **You are filming vertigo in your movie, literally and figuratively.**

There are times when making an important decision, one may feel vulnerable, lonely, when our instinct suddenly obscures our comfort level and sense of direction. It is similar to a mental leap into a new imaginary biographic life. In a sense, this is what vertigo is - an anxiety, and a fear before letting go. I wanted to capture the physical emotions experienced when taking the plunge. I set the stage and the storyline so that the film would be constructed around this idea. The choices we make define our identity, the trail to our life, as important as or even more so than our heritage. This is especially meaningful to film this reality in a multi-racial city like Marseille. Marco, Medhi, Suzanne and the police sergeant are set to act, making a decision changing them and their foreseeable future. Corniche Kennedy is in a way inspired by Jean Paul Sartre's philosophy.

### **How did you yourself measure the risks of the dives in connection with making this movie?**

From the start, this was a big concern, almost an obsession on our part! But we did choose experienced divers as our actors among the youths. There was a sense of responsibility on their end, to demonstrate their talent and be at their best to immortalize these moments for the audience, and we learned a lot from them. We also took great safety measures with a boat, a diver and a doctor ready on the set in case needed. Even though they had jumped before, the actors trained very conscientiously with Lionel Franc. There was always that uncertainty and anxiety just before a dive, and we always gave our actors the option to use a stuntman - yet they categorically refused.

### **What about the lighting?**

This was very important in the movie, as it was entirely filmed outside with natural light. I have known Isabelle Razavet, our Director of Photography for a long time. I felt confident in her ability to be factual but also transcend our characters and this landscape surrounding us. She worked extensively on the

search for filming locations and timed our takes at precise time for ideal lighting. It takes a lot more than finding a spot on the cliff and turning the camera on to create these moments in the film. It is odd that Corniche Kennedy may come across as one of my most spontaneous films, when in reality it was the most difficult to make.

### **There are multiple appearances of the octopus**

The octopus is a multi-faceted mirror, a see-through to the shadow of the mafia, the wonders and dangers awaiting our protagonists. Weightless, the octopus moves freely, like the sea urchin, the clouds in the sky and the seaweed under water. It is a dreamlike vision of our natural world, which cares for us yet surpasses us all. Once caught and pulled out of the water, the Octopus lies colorless in a puddle, mocked, only waiting to be cooked and eaten. This is also a metaphor for adolescence, and how youthful energy is often constrained by society's rules. The fishing scene in Rossellini's film "Stromboli" was a source of inspiration for this part of the script. It is at the same time a documentary of an explosion and also a documentary about actors. The magnificent Ingrid Bergman is elevated by and transcends the sublime landscape surrounding her. I was also inspired by Rhomer's "in the present" filming style. For Corniche Kennedy, this was very much how we operated for practical matters. For the dives, when Alain jumped from 18 meters and Lola from 6 meters, we only had one take and had to get it right the first time.

### **The implicit police intrigue in the film provides a link to the social impact.**

Maylis de Kerangal's novel had a straightforward storyline around the police plot, which gave me some flexibility to change and adapt it to my script.

The number of drug-related deaths among younger people has reached epidemic proportions in Marseille. It is simply shocking. It is Moloch devouring our children. Then there is unemployment, lack of opportunities for work, and failing schools. The system is cheating these kids, violently and purposely in some ways, blocking them from success from the start. In their world, organized crime is a way to avoid failure and a chance to work and thrive. I needed to reflect this tragic reality in the film as our heroes are confronted by it every day. They don't fall into a life of organized crime, but they are bystanders standing at the edge.

I first reached out to the local police to be objective, but I got mostly stereotyped feedback rather than true insights into life in the city's tough neighborhoods. But I was fortunate through my Marseille connections to meet an



amazing police officer, a real gem. We became friends, and he helped me understand the dynamic of the city and its issues. He actually has a small part in the film... Moussa Maaskri is one of the actors, who plays a cop. He is amazing - sensitive, powerful, and poignant. We spent a lot of time talking about his city. He is so passionate about it, as are the other actors from Marseille, including Rachid Hafassa, Cyril Brunet, Agnès Régolo. They were all supportive, open and generous with their time, and happy to share their stories.

### **The music, at times light and at other times alarming, links the storyline and the police intrigue.**

I reconnected with Beatrice Thiriet for the music in Corniche Kennedy. She is an outstanding musician, and we have worked together on all of my films for the last 20 years. We have a wonderful partnership, which has lasted close to the age of our protagonists in the movie! The music is a blend of electro and symphonic vocals. We recorded it with an orchestra, mixing strings and sounds with the lyrics from Kamel and Dante. It is a rich, colorful music score, with sounds flowing from sirens, the deep sea, the oriental pitch of a trumpet following Aissa Maiga during her night rounds. The compositions range from joyful, sad, sensual, and mysterious, revealing the wonderful words and music of N'selfik, Kamel, Imhotep and Dante's slam of Nsongs. At the end of the



film, during the credits, one can hear the voice of Saian Supa Crew, whom we originally met when we filmed “Nadia and the Hippopotamus.” The music carries and elevates the film. It is at times light, jazzy, and urban, but also symphonic, bright, and looking far into the horizon, much alike Maylis’s writing. It is no coincidence that there is such an affinity between her and Beatrice.

### **How were the rap scores composed?**

Kamel writes his own songs, and I wanted his music to have a place in the film. He worked with Beatrice on adapting one of his scores. I was then fortunate to meet Imhotep of IAM, a legendary band in Marseille that generously offered to write some music to accompany Kamel’s lyrics.

### **In the novel, the character of the police detective is a man. Why did you cast a woman instead?**

Who knows why? I imagined this character as a male police officer who was curious about these kids, and then I wrote the part for a woman! Then when I thought of Aissa Maiga for the part, I again rearranged the role. Aissa was the

lead in “Quand la Ville Mord,” a TV film I directed, and I really enjoyed working with her. It is a delight to film her. She has a fragile grace and such strong character. In Corniche Kennedy, she is poised and responsible, looking after the young adults primarily through the eyes of her job, being a cop. The adults in this movie are portrayed as somewhat rigid, broken souls, domesticated and subservient in a way, a contrast with the vitality we feel from the youth. As Medhi said to the detective in one of the scenes. “Look at you, you are gloomy, me, I am sunny, I am alive.” Without revealing many details about her, we wanted her reaction and her emotions at the end of the film to make sense to the audience.

### **Rightly so, at the end of the film, Marco and Suzanne extended their hands to her.**

Perhaps it is because these young people also lend a hand to me. At this instant in the movie, in this place only, the youth are no longer “troubled,” and she is no longer a cop, but just someone suffering with vertigo in need of help. They are driven by human kindness, as is she. She lets them go rather than arresting them. In this environment, standing on the precipice, one feels the freedom to act without constraints of what might be expected.

Interviewed by Claire Vasse

