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QUINZAINÉ
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CANNES 2022

ASHKAL

A FILM BY YOUSSEF CHEBBI

أشكال



SUPERNOVA FILMS
present

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ASHKAL

A film by YOUSSEF CHEBBI

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SYNOPSIS

In the Gardens of Carthage, a district of Tunis initiated by the former Regime which construction stopped at the beginning of the Revolution, two cops, Fatma and Batal, find a burnt body in one of the lots. As construction slowly resumes, they start looking into this mysterious case. When the event repeats itself, the investigation takes a puzzling turn.



INTERVIEW WITH YOUSSEF CHEBBI

From the very beginning of *Ashkal*, we're struck by the decisive way in which you turn your back on the clichés associated with North Africa and its cinema: instead of sunshine, a harsh, grim light; instead of bustling streets, deserted landscapes; instead of a chronicle, a cross between several genres: crime, fantasy...

My initial desire was indeed to try my hand at making a genre film – something rarely done in Tunisia. Our cinema often stays on the surface of things. And it's often limited to a frontal approach to reality and a handful of themes that leave little to the imagination: a hospitable Tunisia where it's sunny and warm, its markets, its spices, or the contradictions between modernity and tradition, the status of women, religion... There's so much more to do and show, so many more spaces and possibilities to explore. I've always been sensitive to Tunisia's cinematic potential, and more particularly that of Tunis. It's in this context that I like importing themes to test them out and see how they react in contact with the Tunisian landscape. This gives me some perspective with regards to society and what I want to say. One of my short films was about a vampire in exile who returns to Tunisia and becomes an ephemeral human being again... Two months before we started shooting *Ashkal*, on the advice of my producer, I rewatched *Cure* by Kiyoshi Kurosawa, and I think you can see traces of it. But for that, before being able to venture into crime and fantasy, I needed to get a firm grasp of historic themes tied to Tunisia – not only as subjects, but as actual sources of imagination.

The first of these themes is an area with a particular architectural style – the Gardens of Carthage. It's a unique place that's quite far from the image of Tunisia.

Numerous aspects of the Gardens of Carthage reminded me of investigative films – or borderline science fiction – particularly the contrast of the very empty with the very solid... I discovered the area through my mother who, thanks to a program equivalent to a home ownership savings scheme, was able to buy a piece of land there after 30 years to build her house. She's now lived there for 3 years. Before that, our family had always lived in mixed, working-class neighborhoods... The Gardens of Carthage is completely different. On one hand, it was built according to a Dubai-esque model, with very straight, very glazed buildings, and on the other, it's a place meant to welcome high society and even members of government. The rents there reach astronomical prices, and neighborhood life is virtually non-existent: everything happens inside the apartments or villas.



How do the Gardens of Carthage tie into the country's recent history?

Until recently, this kind of urban planning reserved for a caste, which you can find in Morocco, for example, didn't exist in Tunisia. The Gardens of Carthage were wanted by the former Ben Ali regime. And the location is not irrelevant: it's just a stone's throw from the presidential palace, on the ruins of the ancient Carthaginian city where, because of possible excavations, it is normally forbidden to build. Construction work began with great fanfare in 2003. But a court order brought everything to a halt with the fall of Ben Ali in 2011. Many misappropriations were discovered. Even now, some cases remain open, and contractors are still in jail. I discovered the neighborhood in this state, about five years ago, like an abandoned construction site, a slightly surreal place, an outdoor studio that I wanted to explore through a film. These days, the area's coming back to life, people are returning there...

Another historical element is an internal police investigation intended to relieve the responsibilities of the Ben Ali era...

First, you have to remember that the police have always been a problem in Tunisia. Basically, Tunisia has always been a police state where the Minister of the Interior acts like the Prime Minister. The "Truth and Rehabilitation" commission in my film was inspired by an authority created in 2013 called "Truth and Dignity". Those who belonged to the former regime called for a great law for national pardon. They wanted us to forget everything that happened under Ben Ali, and even under Bourguiba. Many argued that, on the contrary, a considerable amount of testimony and wire-tapping was necessary, that the victims needed to testify. Those cases had to be investigated and sent to the Ministry of the Interior and the guilty brought to justice and convicted. That work was done. It continued until 2019. A 2500-page report was produced containing terrible stories of corruption as well as assassinations, torture, rape, disappearances... Everything was filmed and the images were made available, namely on the entity's website and on YouTube. But all for naught: the police and Ministry of the Interior never followed up. No trial was held. For many, the feeling of betrayal was immense. And on top of it, the police took advantage of the wave of terrorism in 2014-15 to argue that it had better things to do than stir up the ashes of the past...



A charred corpse, then others, appear gradually at empty construction sites. The investigation is led by two police officers, an older man, Batal, and a young woman, Fatma. Who are these characters? How did you choose the actors who portray them – Mohamed Houcine Grayaa and Fatma Oussaifi?

Batal is a pure product of the Ben Ali era. He climbed up through the ranks by following orders, not forgetting to help himself along the way. He's one of those responsible for the corruption. Grayaa is someone I've known and really appreciated for a long time. He had a role in my first short film and I wrote *Ashkal* with him in mind. His first standout role was as a halfwit in *Khorma, le Crieur de Nouvelles* (2002) by Jilani Saadi. After that, Grayaa was often cast in the same role as a clown. You have to admit that he can be very funny. But for me, I've always found his face very expressive, very unique, with a huge potential for tragedy...

Fatma Oussaifi isn't an actress but rather a dancer and dance teacher. I met her a few years ago in the offices of a production house I was working with. She was there to shoot a dance video. I was looking for an actress who could speak Italian. She fit the bill. I was touched by her face, and her energy. Unfortunately, the project never saw the light of day. I also wrote *Ashkal* with her in mind. Grayaa constantly pulled Fatma upward, and together they made a superb duo, both in the film and on set.

Are there a lot of female inspectors like Fatma in Tunisia today?

Some do exist. Ad campaigns aimed at regilding the image of the police even feature attractive women wearing make-up and sunglasses. There is also a policewomen's union... But they are still rare, and the police force remains a highly masculine environment.

For a while, I racked my brain trying to justify the existence of such a character, then ultimately decided to impose Fatma as she is. In fact, if she has any role models, they're my cousins – young ladies from the upper middle class for whom it's only logical to continue the family tradition by becoming magistrates or doctors like their fathers... That's the case for Fatma, except that, instead of becoming a lawyer and activist like her father, she preferred to get closer to the field by becoming a cop. She isn't someone who's interested in files or ideas. And that's precisely what interests me about her: her indifference to ideological, religious, or political discourse. Fatma is someone who needs to confront things head on.

Was this something you wanted from the outset – the association of a seasoned actor and a non-actress?

Yes. And I insisted on the workers being played by actual workers, for example... For me, Batal and Fatma belong to the fiction and all the rest is reality. It's important for anchoring the film in the neighborhood.

Their investigation reveals a link between these bodies and the presence of not only fire, but also a character who seems to be its "bearer". This also involves the history of Tunisia: everyone knows what the Arab Spring owes to public immolations...

Not only did I take a great interest in the immolations, but also the videos that made it possible to circulate them. I was struck by the questions they raise in terms of representation. It's particularly strange to see to the extent to which the act of self-immolation transcends the identity of the person concerned. We all remember the first person to self-immolate, Mohammed Bouazizi, on December 17, 2010, at Sidi Bouzid, less than a month after the fall of Ben Ali. But he's the only one. Afterward, when the act became "democratized", reaching several hundred cases per year, the names of those concerned were no longer mentioned. Just before we started filming, other cases popped up: a young man in the middle of the city, on Bourguiba Avenue, and another in the offices of the Ennahda, the Islamist party. But self-immolation has become so commonplace that it's lost its impact. Society no longer wants to see it, understand it, or recognize how someone can reach a point of such despair.

What was it about the self-immolated's loss of identity that caught your attention?

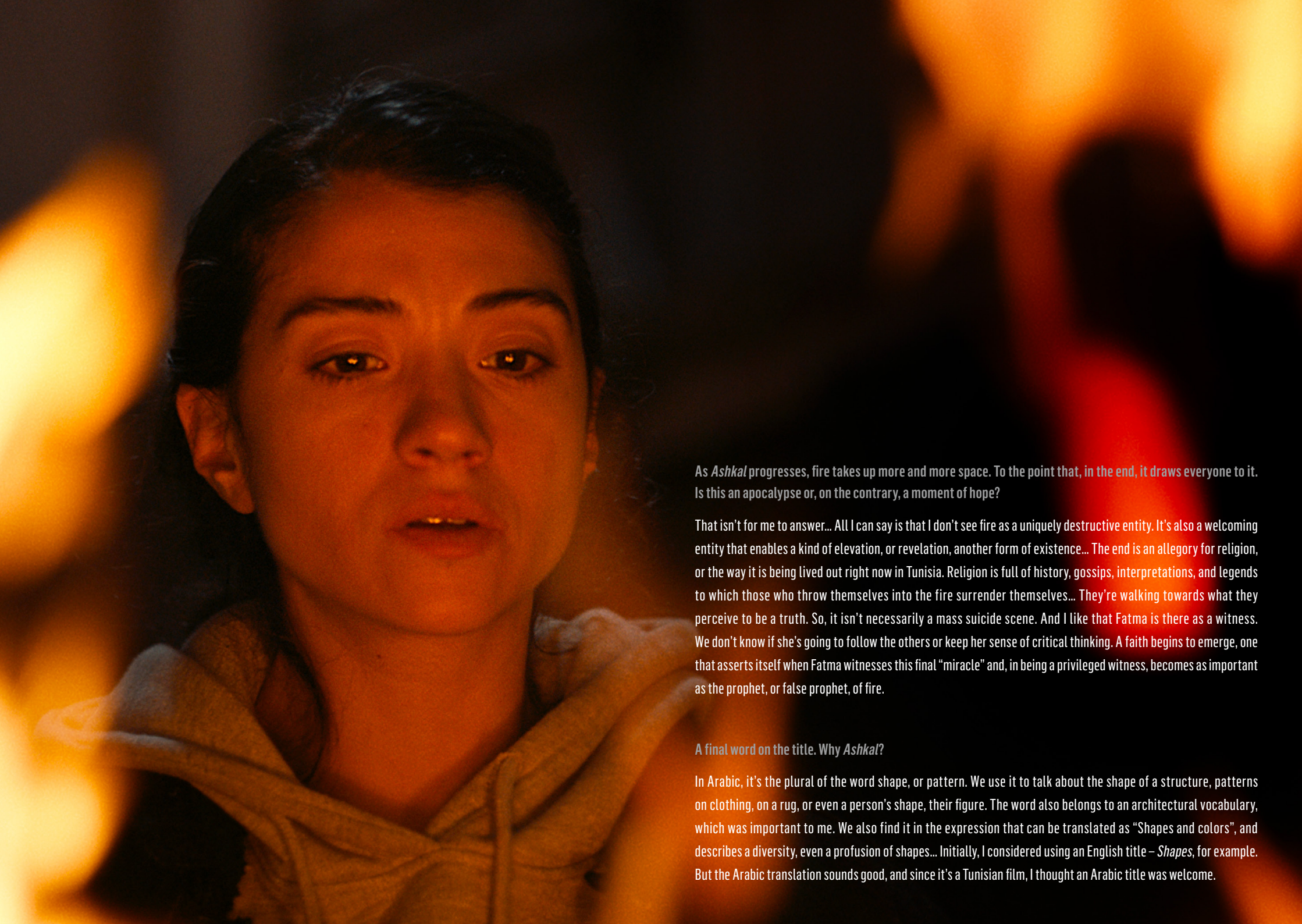
It's the connection with divine symbols I saw in it. While it's forbidden to represent the Prophet, there are Persian miniatures in which Mahomet is depicted with a kind of sacred fire hiding his face. This is what gave rise to the third character, of whom we only see his hands – this man who burns again and again without being destroyed by the fire and who takes on a growing importance to the point of kidnapping the film...

The act of self-immolation is political – but also prophetic: it's about provoking an awakening, about calling on each and everyone to transform their circumstances. It's a sacrifice of oneself for the good of others. In fact, though Islam – and other monotheistic religions – consider suicide a sin, authorities now recognize the self-immolated as martyrs in the manifest effort to maintain social order by avoiding the disturbances that their act can provoke. In this general context, it seemed original and worthwhile to establish a dialogue between the Facebook or YouTube videos and the Persian miniatures.

Fire is also a visual theme that takes on a particular strength as soon as it appears inside this empty landscape...

I wanted something that would counteract the cold minimalism of the buildings and give them life. I filmed them like temples whose hearts would burn. On one side, the very upright and very strict forms, and on the other, this fire capable of taking on any shape, like a burning and elusive hearth amidst an overly static landscape. I was interested in searching inside these abandoned architectures to see which other architectures are revealed when we go inside them, and the light moves.





*As **Ashkal** progresses, fire takes up more and more space. To the point that, in the end, it draws everyone to it. Is this an apocalypse or, on the contrary, a moment of hope?*

*That isn't for me to answer... All I can say is that I don't see fire as a uniquely destructive entity. It's also a welcoming entity that enables a kind of elevation, or revelation, another form of existence... The end is an allegory for religion, or the way it is being lived out right now in Tunisia. Religion is full of history, gossips, interpretations, and legends to which those who throw themselves into the fire surrender themselves... They're walking towards what they perceive to be a truth. So, it isn't necessarily a mass suicide scene. And I like that **Fatma is there as a witness**. We don't know if she's going to follow the others or keep her sense of critical thinking. A faith begins to emerge, one that asserts itself when Fatma witnesses this final "miracle" and, in being a privileged witness, becomes as important as the prophet, or false prophet, of fire.*

*A final word on the title. Why **Ashkal**?*

*In Arabic, it's the plural of the word shape, or pattern. We use it to talk about the shape of a structure, patterns on clothing, on a rug, or even a person's shape, their figure. The word also belongs to an architectural vocabulary, which was important to me. We also find it in the expression that can be translated as "Shapes and colors", and describes a diversity, even a profusion of shapes... Initially, I considered using an English title – *Shapes*, for example. But the Arabic translation sounds good, and since it's a Tunisian film, I thought an Arabic title was welcome.*



BIOGRAPHY YOUSSEF CHEBBI

Youssef Chebbi was born in Tunisia in 1984. After studying art, he directed two short films, *Vers le Nord* and *Les Profondeurs* selected in several international festivals. In 2012 he codirected a documentary *Babylon* which won the Jury Prize at the FID of Marseille and was presented at MoMA. *Ashkal* is his first feature.



2012 **BABYLON** (doc)
2012 **LES PROFONDEURS** (cm/short)
2010 **VERS LE NORD** (cm/short)

FILMOGRAPHY



CAST

Fatma Fatma Oussaifi

Batal Mohamed Houcine Grayaa

The Hooded Man Rami Harrabi

Lassad Hichem Riahi

Bouhlel Nabil Trabelsi

Jilani Bahri Rahali

CREW

Script **Youssef Chebbi, François-Michel Allegrini**

Director of Photography **Hazem Berrabah**

Sound **Aymen Labidi, Waldir Xavier, Mathieu Nappes**

Set Design **Malek Gnaoui**

Editor **Valentin Feron**

Music **Thomas Kuratli**

Sound Editor **Alexander Dudarev**

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