



MOSTRA INTERNAZIONALE
D'ARTE CINEMATOGRAFICA
LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA 2024
Official Selection

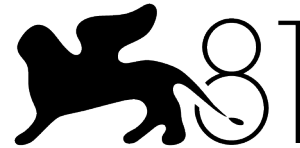
عائشة

AÏCHA

A FILM BY
MEHDI M. BARSAOUI

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AICHA

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TUNISIA - FRANCE - ITALY - SAUDI ARABIA - QATAR
FICTION / 2024 / 123'
FORMAT: 2.39 / SOUND 5.1

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Synopsis

Aya, in her late twenties, still lives with her parents in southern Tunisia and feels trapped in a life without prospects. One day, the minivan in which she commutes daily between her town and the hotel where she works crashes. As the sole survivor of the accident, she realizes it could be her chance to start a new life. She flees to Tunis under a new identity, but everything is soon compromised when she becomes the main witness to a police blunder.



Interview

with MEHDI M. BARSAOUI

A portrait of a woman, a radiology of a country, how did the idea for *Aïcha* come about?

In 2019, a news story shook public opinion in Tunisia. A young woman who'd miraculously survived a bus crash decided to pretend to be dead to test her parent's love. Making the decision to leave everything behind, overnight, without premeditation, to go into hiding, leaving behind her family, her past, her wounds... I found that fascinating, heroic and profoundly sad all at once... How do you become that desperate? How, in a country that sanctifies parental authority, where you must obey your parents' body and soul, could you inflict such suffering on them? And most importantly, why? It was in trying to answer these questions that I first got the idea for the film. The young woman in question only lasted 3 days with her secret in real life, but the story stayed with me, haunting me until the day I found out I was going to be a father to a little girl. A light bulb went off. Parenthood relentlessly projects you into the future, pushing you to lay the foundations of the principles and values you want to pass on to your children. I also quickly started wondering about the environment in which I was going to welcome my daughter because, behind Tunisia's beautiful image as one of the most modern and free countries in the Arab world lies a complex side, full of paradoxes and contradictions, where most of the population is merely surviving instead of living. The simulacrum of death to live rather than survive inspired film's title: *Aïcha*, which, in literal Arabic, means alive. That was the basis of the film.

How did you go about writing the script?

In different stages. Having taken a lot of liberties with the original news story, I had to start from scratch with this character to build her trajectory. As I went about defining this female character's motivations to motivate her quest for reconstruction, the reality of Tunisia caught up with me. Between frustration, social injustice, family pressure, and social and religious diktats, this character personified a tormented, cheated Tunisian youth whose wings had been clipped... A youth deprived of their free will in favor of ancestral beliefs and desires. Full of dreams and a thirst for freedom, sacrificed on the altar of a country's social, religious and eco-

-nomic ideology... In her quest for freedom, my character is confronted with various obstacles: family authority and the submissive relationship, misogyny, sexism and, more generally, the place of women in society - but most importantly, the corruption and oppression of the police, their omnipresence and omnipotence over the population. So, it's a layered, stratified script that evolves as the character progresses.

Social issues, intimacy, politics, the police, suspense... multiple themes collide in the film.

The narrative dictates the rules. When I was sketching out the premise of the film, I wasn't thinking about genre at all. It was the character that interested me, and the choices that would arise from the simulacrum of death. As the script evolved, the character changed, and the genre along with her. It was the script that inspired the genre, establishing the rhythm and the staging. Tozeur isn't filmed like Tunis. Aya isn't filmed like Amira who isn't filmed like Aïcha. It was exciting to direct, but I had to be constantly vigilant to ensure the coherence of the story and the character's evolution. I owe a lot to my team, who were a huge support throughout this process, and also to the protagonist, Fatma Sfar, who understood everything about the characters she was going to play.



Let's talk about the choice of Fatma Sfar who plays Aya in all her facets.

Fatma was the obvious choice. I'm not a fan of the screen tests where actors are asked to do scenes taken from the script, which are often misinterpreted and acted out in cold, impersonal offices with no soul - I found it frustrating. So, the casting director and I came up with a new way of holding auditions while giving the actresses the freedom to choose. The first step of the film's casting process was therefore based on an improvisation exercise we set up. The women auditioning for the role didn't know much about the story, only that they had to stand up to a policeman for as long as they could while concealing their identity for as long as possible. They were allowed to say and do anything - they were completely free. It was exciting because you could see right away how talented each of them was at getting out of trouble. Fatma stood out in that exercise and then nailed it in the more classical tests. I was struck by her magnetism. I knew she was the one.

And what about Nidhal Saadi who plays the role of the deputy police chief? He's a huge star in Tunisia.

That's right. Nidhal is a star in Tunisia, known mainly from TV series. I didn't know him personally; it was my casting director who introduced us. I was a little hesitant at first because Nidhal is very different from the Fares I'd imagined while writing the script. He has an athletic body and an incredible energy whereas I'd imagined Fares as rather dull, taciturn and paunchy. During the improvisation exercises we did together, I was blown away by how credible he was in the role of the policeman. He didn't think twice about putting on 20 kilos for the film, abandoning his handsome-guy image to play a policeman who's let himself go and isn't too bothered about his looks. Fares is a complex character whose motivations remain unclear right up to the end, and choosing Nidhal to play him added depth to the character, preventing him from falling into the cliché of the dehumanized, unscrupulous cop you can spot from his first expression.

Aya is plural in the film. How did you manage her metamorphosis?

Aya goes through several phases before trying to become the woman she's always wanted to be. It's a trajectory that's definitely scripted, but one that's also supported by a lot of directorial detail. Everything was thought out with the character's evolution in mind. From the props to the different costumes, including makeup, hairstyle, setting, lighting, the way the character carries herself, walks, looks... All these details

were meticulously worked out with the various department heads and the protagonist to make Aya's metamorphosis from Amira to Aïcha as credible as possible. With Antoine Héberlé, the film's cinematographer, we also opted for two completely different ways of filming the character. Whereas in *Tozeur* at the start of the film we've got a camera that's clearly organic but rather passive, seeing, capturing and following the character in her very dull everyday life, in Tunis, the camera changes with Aya's gaze as she becomes Amira. The camera becomes less contemplative and starts to direct the gaze, becoming active, like the character. The colors become more flamboyant and the dullness of the beginning gives way to brilliant colors.

The scenery plays a major role in the film.

Absolutely. *Tozeur* and Tunis are characters in their own right. They not only provide context for the narrative's evolution but also play a very important role in the protagonist's psychology. While Aya's *Tozeur* represents the immobility, passivity and monotony of a dull everyday life, Tunis is exactly the opposite, with its immensity, energy and vitality. Aya idealizes Tunis, fantasizes about it. It's a city where the impossible becomes possible, allowing her to live out her dream. The backdrops are a sort of murky cast of characters, blurring



the lines and confusing the issues. The cities evolve over the course of the film, and not always in the right direction. Location scouting has always been an exciting step for me; it anchors the characters in an environment that automatically rubs off on their actions. The choice of sets also influences the mise-en-scène. It's a crucial stage in the making of a film.

You make no judgements about your characters.

That's what I try to do from the moment I start writing the script - to approach it as a bias. To portray the characters in all their facets, whether they're positive or negative. It was important for me to avoid a certain kind of Manichaeism, which isn't very interesting in cinema. We're looking for complex, nuanced characters whose trajectories we can't guess. I remain convinced that we're all inhabited by dualities, and it's these dualities that interest me. I also like to thwart the audience's expectations, with Lobna, for example, portrayed as a quiet girl who commands Aya's admiration but who ultimately proves to be very different. I also like to depict benevolent monsters, far from suspicion, to make things less conventional in my view.



The film deals with corruption within certain institutions. Where is Tunisia, 13 years after the 2011 uprising?

There's no denying that what we experienced in 2011 was one of the most beautiful things to happen in contemporary Tunisian history. 2011 allowed Tunisian youth to acquire a political conscience and take back the republic. Some days are less happy than others because we still have a long way to go towards full democracy. There have been abuses, and abuses continue to this day, which is why we denounce them. It's important to be able to denounce them and have the means to do so through art and film, for example. 2011 was a pivotal year in the history of Tunisia, and I don't think we'll soon forget it. It's in the name of a very hard-won freedom of expression that we must continue the fight, denouncing while we still can, for our successful democratic transition so that we can pass on to our children the hope of a better future and a better society.

The film is often shot in close-up, in scope format. What prompted that choice?

Antoine Héberlé (the cinematographer) and I made that choice very early on during the scriptwriting phase. I started having Antoine read the various versions to get him involved beforehand so he could immerse himself in the writing, and we quickly agreed on the use of scope, which, combined with close-ups, enables us to amplify every look and every emotion. In wide-angle shots, scope also allows us to play with perspectives, isolating our characters in the setting, offering a multitude of graphic compositions and giving us the chance to tell the story of the staging through the frame. I like scope because it lends a certain vitality to the staging by offering a wide view, a cut-out in the shot, without necessarily going through editing.

Let's talk about editing, since you're an editor by training.

Yes, I come from an editing background, but I don't edit my own films. I rely on Camille Toubkis, with whom I previously worked on my first film, *A Son*. To be honest, the editing phase is my favorite part of making a film. Being confronted with one's material, with no way of escaping, gluing together the little bits of shots in an artisanal way - I find it fascinating. Camille and I took our time to explore all possible avenues so we could be sure about the choices we made. Editing is the definitive writing of the film, the final touch we add to our story. And editing *Aicha* was tedious. The tricky part was finding the right balance between the different trajectories addressed in the script. First, the personal and intimate trajectory of our protagonist, combined

with the political trajectory of the police case, and finally the resolution of the plot. To find that balance, we were forced to make choices and ask ourselves questions, which nourishes the film and helps it take on its final shape. It's always a crucial phase, and one from which we emerge a little exhausted but happy to meet our film.

You opted for a rather open ending. Why did you choose that last image?

It's what Aya becomes that interests me, not what she's going to become. I'm kind of playing with words a little, but it's the realization of the person she wants to become that was important to me. What she does with her new life is up to her. In fact, another film could open there. I wanted to stay on that momentum, on her first step into her new life, her first step into her new life as Aïcha, free and, more than ever, "alive".



Mehdi M. Barsaoui

Born in 1984 in Tunis, Mehdi graduated in editing from the Higher Institute of Multimedia Arts in Tunis. He then went to Italy to complete his training and graduated as a director from DAMS in Bologna. He has directed three short films, which have received recognition and awards at several international festivals. His first feature film *A Son* started its international career in the official selection at the 76th edition of the Venice Film Festival, where it received two awards, under which Best Actor for Sami Bouajila. Distributed in twenty countries and winning multiple awards all over the world, *A Son* is the first Tunisian film to win a French César Award. *Aicha* is his second feature film.

Filmography

- | | |
|------|------------------------------------------------|
| 2019 | <i>A Son</i> |
| 2016 | <i>We are just fine like this</i> - short film |
| 2013 | <i>Bobby</i> - short film |
| 2010 | <i>Sideways</i> - short film |



Cast

Aya

Fatma Sfar

Rafik

Mohamed Ali Ben Jemaa

Fares

Nidhal Saadi

Karim

Ala Benhamad

Lobna

Yasmine Dimassi

Commissioner

Sawssen Maalej

Hela

Hela Ayed



Credits

Director and writer	Mehdi M. Barsaoui
Producers	Habib Attia, Marc Irmer
Co-Producers	Chantal Fischer, Flaminio Zadra, Antoine Khalife, Faisal Baltyuor
Screenplay	Mehdi M. Barsaoui
Photography	Antoine Héberlé
Sound	Stefano Campus, Dario Calvari, Simone Chiossi, Simone Usai
Set Designer	Sophie Abdelkafi
Music	Amine Bouhafa
Editor	Camille Toubkis
Costume Designer	Randa Khedher



