
BEHIND THE
PALM TREES
A film by MERYEM BENM'BAREK

JEAN BRÉHAT, EMMA BINET, SOUAD LAMRIKI, OLIVIER DUBOIS
PRESENT

MARRAKECH INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

BEHIND THE PALM TREES

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In Tangier, Mehdi's relationship with Selma is disrupted when he meets Marie, a wealthy Frenchwoman whose parents have purchased a luxurious villa in the kasbah. Drawn to her glamorous lifestyle, he drifts away from Selma, pretending not to see that his choices will eventually catch up with him.

INTERVIEW WITH MERYEM BENM'BAREK

How were Mehdi, Selma and Marie born?

Behind the Palm Trees stems from something deeply personal: the film is the sum of my romantic experiences, where at different times I could be Selma, Mehdi, or Marie. These stories shaped my view of the world and gave rise to the narrative I wanted to tell. But the film goes beyond the personal: it explores how love reveals the social, cultural, and historical forces that structure our lives. Where *Sofia* offered a sharp critique of how social divides corrode human trajectories, this new film seeks a more novelistic terrain, attempting to reveal the invisible dynamics that guide our desires. Through this story, intimacy becomes a political space, a way of questioning the world and showing that what seems personal is always traversed by the collective.

Was it easy for you to adopt a male perspective?

It was a first for me, and it took time to find Mehdi's voice. He is a man in love, full of doubts and contradictions, often torn and led to make the wrong choices. I wanted to remain faithful to his mystery, without making him more expressive than he naturally is, aware that Moroccan society - like all societies, in fact - does not encourage men to reveal their emotions.

***Behind the Palm Trees* lies halfway between social drama and cruel tale...**

No doubt because I draw as much from Russian literature as from Greek tragedies. The genre imposed itself: we open on a romance that gradually shifts toward darker tones, revealing the forces and tensions that govern the lives of the characters. I did not set out to write a thriller: it was the characters' journeys and the development of the story that progressively led me there, where each scene seems to bring the protagonist closer to his downfall, in an implacable spiral. That said, my taste for cinema was shaped by thrillers of the 1990s, a genre I particularly love, and it is possible that this sensibility naturally guided me in that direction.

In this film as in *Sofia*, romantic encounters happen through tears. The first time Mehdi speaks with Marie, she is crying over the loss of her cat...

For me, it was a way not to make Marie detestable and to explain why Mehdi is touched and falls in love with her. Even if she may seem annoying or spoiled, she also reveals a deep fragility, caught in a complex relationship with her mother that shapes her way of being in the world. She believes she is free, but she is not: a forty-year-old woman supported by her parents, she contrasts with Selma, who works two jobs and sends money to her uncle.

On an intimate level, what Mehdi experiences with each of the two women is profoundly different. With Selma, the situation is intense: he desires her, while she resists him. This young, assertive woman insists on respecting the boundaries she has set as a believer, which does not prevent the desire she feels for him. In contrast, Marie opens up and gives herself to him very quickly, and her apparent freedom fascinates Mehdi, who imagines that life will be easier at her side. Gradually, he lets himself be drawn into a lifestyle that is not his own, seductive in appearance, but foreign to his true aspirations.

The wrong choice he makes is to pursue a dream founded on a capitalist ideology, where everything is measured by money and power, at the expense of deeper bonds. And in this, he is encouraged by Marie, who needs Mehdi to be socially more than a construction worker to be accepted by her parents. Marie's desire in fact reveals a profound contempt for what he truly is. Mehdi, blinded by the social expectations of Marie and her family, thus precipitates his own downfall.

How did you conceive Marie's world, whose parents adopt a postcolonial, condescending attitude toward Mehdi and Moroccans in general?

Bernard and Clotilde, Marie's parents, are intellectuals, art collectors, and lovers of beautiful things. Their attitude was inspired by what I have observed or experienced, and through them, I wanted to highlight ordinary racism and the psychological violence it generates. These behaviors do not arise out of nowhere: they are the fruit of history and colonial legacies. Morocco was a French protectorate, and the structures of colonial domination leave deep traces in mentalities and interpersonal relations.

Clotilde is a neurotic woman, whose desire and fragility remain largely contained by her upbringing. Her friend Stacy, a wealthy American socialite, organizer of ostentatious parties in Tangier and engaged in sex tourism, acts as a mirror: she embodies what Clotilde could become if she gave free rein to her deeper desires. This contrast is revealed in the nocturnal sequence with Mehdi, where Clotilde's ambiguous behavior highlights her own vulnerability. We perceive how fragile she remains, in a competitive and conflictual relationship with her daughter, and trapped by her own limits and contradictions.

Why Tangier as a backdrop?

Tangier is an eclectic city, where intellectuals and artists cross paths. I forged part of my view of Morocco there, and more broadly of the world. Tourism is present, but less frenetic than in Marrakech; the atmosphere is more intimate and complex. The omnipresent sea, and the view of Spain on the horizon, suggest an elsewhere always possible, both close and inaccessible. This singular geography tells the tensions and desires of the characters, making Tangier a character in its own right.

How did you choose your settings?

Mehdi had to move between three distinct worlds: his own, Marie's, and Selma's, each telling a different reality. The villas in the film are hidden behind fences and dense vegetation. In their backyards, the violence of a two-speed reality is revealed, as during Stacy's party. Mehdi's home interior had to be a refuge, a space of safety and calm. For Selma, I wanted her places to be modest, in line with her modest background, but also joyful and lively. Her colorful apartment and the turquoise bakery where she works reflect the idea that warmth and brightness also exist in her daily life, despite difficulties.

How did you work with your cinematographer, Son Doan, and what were your choices in camera work?

I wanted a steady camera, capable of following Mehdi's movement through these three worlds. With Son Doan, we opted for soft light and warm tones, in keeping with Tangier's enveloping atmosphere. For more intense scenes, such as when Mehdi cries in his mother's arms, the light becomes harsher and the frame widens, to show the violence of the situation. Some sequences had to adopt a more analytical than strictly emotional point of view, to reveal the social forces that traverse and structure the characters' lives.

I also wanted to highlight this city that I love and where I lived when I was younger. Almost every setting in the film is tied to a memory from that time, and I wanted the image to reflect how I myself have kept the trace of these places in my memory, with their atmosphere, colors, and lights.

You film the love scenes in two different ways.

I wanted the love scenes between Mehdi and Selma and those between Mehdi and Marie to be diametrically opposed. With Selma, they are filmed with great modesty: when she loses her virginity, the gaze focuses on her face, marking the true turning point of the film. In contrast, the scenes with Marie are freer and reveal the bodies. This way of filming seemed obvious to me from the script stage, as a way of embracing Mehdi's point of view, caught between two women: one who refuses him access to her body, the other who gives herself to him. The spectator had to live and feel it with him.

Two images frame your film: Mehdi in the pool, meeting the wealthy French from below; Mehdi on the restaurant table, threatening Marie from above...

At the beginning, Mehdi looks up at these French who possess more money and power than he does, and his wonder mixed with intimidation toward Marie - appearing in a white dress like a divine apparition - accentuates this gap. At the end, when he climbs onto the table, the gesture becomes a way of refusing domination. This image expresses his response to the social violence he has endured, inscribed in power relations, class struggle, and daily humiliations. The elevated position transforms his body into an instrument of symbolic revenge, revealing his desire to regain control in the face of a world that excludes and despises him.

How did you compose your casting?

For Mehdi's role, I was looking for a charismatic actor, capable of carrying the mystery and intensity of the character. I had seen Driss Ramdi in *A Decent Man* by Emmanuel Finkiel, and when I met him over coffee, I immediately felt he could embody the role.

For the female roles, I wanted two actresses very different physically and in what they radiate. Marie is a slightly bohemian woman, detached and carefree, as if everything seemed easy and without consequence. Sara Giraudeau's almost ethereal presence seemed perfect to embody this lightness and floating quality. Nadia Kounda, on the other hand, has something more grounded, conveying a determination that gradually emerges. Very beautiful without being aware of it, her simplicity adds to her magnetism and natural strength, giving the impression that she shines effortlessly.

This opposition, both physical and emotional, underscores the contrast between the two women and perfectly illustrates how Mehdi finds himself caught between them.

Carole Bouquet has always inspired me. She embodies with precision this bourgeoisie that wants to appear enlightened and elegant, while letting a touch of fantasy shine through. She is also a free, funny, and generous actress, who on set shows absolute respect for everyone's work, which is precious.

For Bernard, Marie's father, I was looking for an actor who seemed sympathetic and warm at first glance, while hinting that his wife dominates him through her social origins. Olivier Rabourdin, a remarkable actor, imposed himself naturally.

For Mehdi's parents, I chose Moroccan actors I admire. Soumaya Akaaboune perfectly embodies the enveloping gentleness I had imagined for the mother, while carrying the depth of her relationship to faith and religion. Anchored in her convictions and in what she passes on to her son, she possesses authenticity and natural presence that immediately convinced me.

Amine Najji exudes quiet strength and innate solidity. His stability, forged by work and experience, makes tangible this hardworking man who built himself through effort and perseverance, while remaining the pillar of his family.

Working with all my performers was a true pleasure: we were in perfect connection on set, and this complicity made the shoot magical.

What heartbeat for this film?

I worked with Christelle de Winter, a queen of editing. The film had to begin with the softness of a romance, before the rhythm accelerated to embrace that of a thriller. But beyond tempo, the great question of editing was to maintain empathy for Mehdi and Marie. That is why we chose to close the film with these seaside scenes, plunging the spectator into Mehdi's gaze and emotions, who at that moment is at the heart of his torment.

How did you approach the music with Jim Williams?

I appreciated Jim Williams' work in Julia Ducournau's films. I am not a musician, but we found a way to communicate and create together a score where both the romantic and the tension of the thriller are expressed, bringing real breadth to the narrative. We needed a fairly classical style, but with a very contemporary grain, and Jim managed to find this delicate balance: conveying both the sense of threat and, at the same time, the roundness of romantic feelings and the vertigo of passion.

Why the title *Behind the Palm Trees*?

Morocco attracts with its landscapes and seductive image, but what happens behind these dazzling façades? For me, cinema's role is to reveal what is not said or tangible, to bring out the invisible and to let the spectator leave the theater with transformed emotion.

For this project, I was fortunate to be accompanied by Jean Bréhat and Emma Binet. They gave me great freedom. Of course, like any filmmaker facing the difficulties of producing a film today, I had to make certain concessions, but never on the intellectual level. I was able to make the film I wanted, fully faithful to my vision, and I am grateful to them.

Interview by Anne-Claire Cieutat

MERYEM BENM'BAREK

Meryem Benm'Barek was born in Rabat, Morocco. She grew up between Morocco, France, and Belgium. During her studies at INSAS, she directed several short films, including Jennah, selected at numerous international festivals and shortlisted for the 2015 Oscars. In 2018, *Sofia*, her first feature film, won the Best Screenplay Award at the Cannes Film Festival in the Un Certain Regard section, before receiving several awards worldwide. *Behind the Palm Trees* is her second feature film.

CAST

MARIE	SARA GIRAUDEAU
MEHDI	DRISS RAMDI
SELMA	NADIA KOUNDA
CLOTILDE	CAROLE BOUQUET
BERNARD	OLIVIER RABOURDIN
WAFAE	SOUMAYA AKAABOUNE
FARID	AMINE ENNAJI
ADAM	AYOUB TROMBATI
STACY	RACHEL O‘MEARA

CREW

DIRECTOR	MERYEM BENM'BAREK
SCREENPLAY	MERYEM BENM'BAREK – FYZAL BOULIFA with the collaboration of EMMA BENESTAN – AGNÈS FEUVRE
ORIGINAL MUSIC	JIM WILLIAMS
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY	SON DOAN
EDITOR	CHRISTEL DEWYNTER
SOUND	FABRICE OSINSKI, JEREMY HASSID, JULIEN PEREZ
1ST ASSISTANT DIRECTOR	REMI BOUVIER
SCRIPT SUPERVISOR	SANDRA DI PASQUALE D'AMICO
PRODUCTION DESIGNER	ITAF BENJELLOUN
HAIR & MAKE-UP	ZHOR BENNANI,ABDERRAHMAN RAYSSE
COSTUMES	ALEXANDRA KAWIAK
PRODUCTION MANAGER	DOUNIA LAHRICHI
STAGE MANAGER	NABIL FARID, SAMIR GOUGAS
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER	CÉDRIC ETTOUATI
PRODUCTION	TESSALIT PRODUCTIONS, FURYO FILMS, AGORA FILMS
IN CO-PRODUCTION WITH	NOVAK PROD, THE BUREAU, CHI-FOU-MI PRODUCTIONS,SHELTER PROD
CO-PRODUCERS	TRISTAN GOLIGHER, BERTRAND FAIVRE, VINCENT GADELLE, HUGO SÉLIGNAC, CLAUDINE KAWIAK, CÉDRIC ETTOUTATI
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