



SPICES and LIES

a film by
AMINE ADJINA

EX NIHILO
PRESENTS

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Mehdi's life lies on a fragile balance. He plays the role of the perfect Algerian son for his mother Fatima, while hiding his relationship with Léa and his passion for French cuisine and wine, which he pursues as a chef at the bistro where he works. But Léa can no longer tolerate his family secrets and demands to meet Fatima. Cornered, Mehdi comes up with the worst possible solution...



INTERVIEW WITH AMINE ADJINA

INTERVIEW BY ANNE-CLAIRE CIEUTAT

Isn't your first film a love letter to your family, and to its women in particular?

For me, creating is always an act of love somehow. Because it involves Eros, and therefore desire. But at the same time, it is also an opportunity to step back and assess things. What ties bind us together? How does that boost us, but also restrain us? The film is not entirely autobiographical, yet it is very personal. Love is definitely at the heart of this story, whether it is the love between Mehdi and Léa, or that between Mehdi and his two mothers. I wanted this love to be ambivalent, inseparable from the main character's dual heritage, and I wanted it to produce a dilemma that would lead him to lie. The dilemma is interesting, because it cannot be solved easily, which gives extra flavor to the story. Even more so since it is set against the backdrop of the tormented and complex relations between France and Algeria.

How did your characters come about? And why did you write them for the screen?

I came to theatre through acting, but it was cinema that led me to acting in the first place. In a way, cinema has always been my primary drive. And it seemed to me that this story would make a good film storyline. The dilemma at its core was inspired by a situation I personally experienced: it took me a long time to introduce my girlfriend to my family. That is how Mehdi, Léa and the knot that hinders their relationship all came about. Then fiction allowed me to untangle the knot and to imagine the character of the stand-in mother.

The comical aspect that arises from this lie also has a melancholic undertone...

Balancing the tones was always on my mind. I am only interested in comedy as long as it is built on a dramatic foundation. The question

of Algerian identity is the backdrop of the film, hence its melancholic dimension.

Melancholy often stems from a feeling or a dread of loss. Mehdi lies in an attempt to maintain an impossible balance. He spends his time trying to deal with situations that are beyond his control, by compartmentalizing his life. However, his life just cannot be divided that way, and Mehdi gets into survival mode, until he is driven into a corner when his lie backfires. But one might consider that what happens to him is an unconsciously deliberate mistake.

The stand-in mother, Souhila, seems to read other people's unconscious, and especially Mehdi's.

Yes, she keeps putting Mehdi's unconscious to the test, which upsets him. She is exuberant, and she tends to generate a dynamic through confrontation. She brings out the truth in all of the characters. Her words have power, because they change the perception and the course of action. She plays with Mehdi's Oedipus complex, with his attachment to his mother... She calls to mind the figure of the fool or the jester in classical theatre, the one through whom the truth is revealed.

Where does your taste for troublemakers -as in Pasolini's Teorema, which you adapted for the stage-, come from?

I believe in decisive and transformative encounters. I really enjoy working on characters who expose contradictions and bring buried truths to light. It is a recurrent motif in my work.

But without otherness, there can be no transformation. True encounters require otherness. Yet today, there are fewer and fewer places where people can meet. Social enclaves have set in. We are facing a lack of alterity, and I really wanted this issue to be central to my film.



You already tackled the question of identity in some of your plays, such as Arthur and Ibrahim...

I have dual citizenship, Algerian and French, which colors everything I write. My identity is therefore in constant dialogue and movement. Multiple identities are also a characteristic of France, it is a collective issue, which is why this story mainly takes place in public places such as the restaurant, Souhila's bar, a parc, or a train. These places are captured in their materiality, but above all in the way they affect bodies. That is where cinema comes in... I was interested in showing the variety of sociocultural backgrounds that make up our country. It is an endless topic of discussion.

The women in this family, either real or fictional, are all colorful characters, each in their own way...

It was important to me to have female characters with full-fledged lives meet and talk to each other. Individuals from various generations and backgrounds, even within the same family. There is Souhila's exuberance, Léa's determination, Mehdi's sisters' freedom of action, etc. All of this paints a picture of different ways of being in the world and, therefore, different types of womanhood.

There are many women in my family, and I have observed firsthand how they run their households, both in France or in Algeria. They are fully in charge of their homes, whether through force, humor, love, bad faith or blackmail... This is a far cry from the received idea of patriarchal Maghrebi communities.

Even in supporting roles, the women in the film all have a very strong relationship with words; they are really articulate about both their torments and their love. Thus, the three sisters, Amel and Yasmine bring their outspokenness, their viewpoints and their humor to the table, defying clichés regarding characters of Algerian descent in French cinema.

A ghost remains hidden in the shadows: the figure of the deceased father.

The death of the father gives the film its social dimension. This man worked himself to death, like many members of the working class of North African descent. Mehdi's mother, Fatima, is convinced

that France stole her husband by exploiting his body at work. So she fears that France might also take her children away. Yet this woman followed her husband to France out of love. His portrait is the only picture in her living room, and he remains a powerful figure. Mehdi is the only man left in the family. His dilemma stems from this situation.

Why did you choose the kitchen as an arena?

I happen to know and love this world. The father of my childhood friend owned a café, and he introduced me to this environment. The character of Bernard, played by Gustave Kervern, was inspired by this man. So I am familiar with the culture of gastronomy and good products, it was part of my upbringing. Besides, one of my brothers is a chef. I think that cooking is a powerful cultural vehicle, and it is also very cinematic. I like its emotional dimension, linked to memory, and its sensuality.

Mehdi learned to cook in a French restaurant, leaving his family's culinary traditions behind. Souhila acts as a catalyst when she questions him on this. Thanks to her, Mehdi realizes that he is in fact incomplete, and that he still has to find his own path and to figure out a way to express himself through cooking. He needs to connect himself both to the world he lives in and to his own history, where the roots of his sensibility lie.

The Lyon settings are meaningful, even in their names.

I think of them as characters in their own rights. I wanted urban settings, located in a big city. Lyon is a gastronomic capital, and a site of significant Algerian immigration. This is why I chose to set the film there.

We called the restaurant where Mehdi and Léa work "Le Baratin", as a nod to a famous old bar in Belleville that I love. Later on it becomes "Le Babel", which reflects Mehdi's multiculturalism.

Together with Michel Schmitt, we designed the restaurant's set down to the smallest details -the wooden floor, the slate, the tableware, the colors, etc.

We also filmed at the "Mostaganem" bar, also transforming the décor. This bar, run by Souhila, is patroned by the down-and-outs. We asked the regular customers if they wanted to appear in these



scenes, because it was important to me that they seemed authentic.

Therefore, Mehdi goes from one world to another, between these two very different establishments, as well as between his mother's apartment and his in-laws' lavish home, all of them contrasting places that seem to be judging each other. Souhila, on the other hand, never judges places. Wherever she is, she feels like she belongs.

You opted for a warm color palette...

Right from the writing phase, I had this palette in mind. Together with director of photography Sébastien Goepfert, we strived to create visual correspondences in the frame by working on color shades, grain, and textures. I wanted the colors to be pure and strong, like in Almodovar or Fassbinder's films. Here, aesthetics take on a political dimension.

A set already tells a story. For instance, for Mehdi's mother's apartment, I wanted a baroque atmosphere, far from the clichés on suburban social housing, supposedly bare and dilapidated... On the contrary, many of these apartments are perfectly kept, because people put a lot into their home. It was important to me that this place combined good taste, kitsch, and saturated spaces, like this purple room which becomes a kind of love room in the sequence between Mehdi and Amel. The first appearance of Fatima, Mehdi's mother, in the middle of the party in her living room, had to be remarkable. She experiences a moment of pure joy before things start to go wrong...

What were your other directing choices?

The sets and situations determined how we filmed. The restaurant where Mehdi and Léa work, for instance, is a place where people show restraint, so it called for mainly still frames and elegant camera moves like on Steadicam. Conversely, in Souhila's bar, the handheld camera matches the energy of the place.

Generally speaking, we wanted the scenes with Souhila to feel more organic, like during the dance scene, when the cinematographer stands in the middle of the crowd. The aim is not to illustrate something, but rather to make the camera a part of the place, like a body. As soon as Souhila appears -in the parc, the train, or at the in-laws- the camera follows her every move. Souhila imposes her

rhythm on the camera, not the other way around.

For me, the relationship between bodies and space point to a way of acting and a way of filming. You need to know how to capture that. It is really instinctive. And in order to make this materiality and what it implies in the narrative visible and tangible, through the situation, you have to find the right distance, the right frame. While many things are expressed in the film, it is always counterbalanced by a form of modesty.

How did you choose your actors?

I worked with casting director Elise Vogel, who provided invaluable insight and support.

For the role of Mehdi, I wanted an actor who could instantly arouse empathy. Viewers had to be able to believe in his lie, and to fear for him. I also wanted someone with a relatable, straightforward approach to people and to everyday life. With his intelligence, humor and subtlety, Younès Boucif was the obvious choice. I found him to be a very committed partner who quickly understood the film's stakes, in both its serious and lighter aspects.

To play the two mothers, I searched for women with strong personalities and great dignity. Hiam Abbass struck me as the perfect choice when I saw her in Lina Soualem's *Bye Bye Tiberias*. Her acting skills are phenomenal. She is upright, aligned, profound, charismatic, and elegant, which was ideal for playing Souhila without turning her into a grotesque caricature. And above all, I wanted to offer her a comic role, against type, which appealed to her. As for Malika Zerrouki, who plays Mehdi's real mother, she is a non-professional actress who has appeared in a few films. When she came to audition for the part, we just knew she was the right person straight away. She is always between laughter and tears. She is in touch with her emotions, and she manages to convey them instantly. She has a really expressive and mobile face and, like Hiam, she can exude great authority.

I love Clara Bretheau's fanciful mind, her strength of character and her freedom. She really takes pleasure in acting. I thought she was great in Valeria Bruni Tedeschi's film *Forever Young*. I think that Younès and Clara make a very modern couple. I had worked with Birane Ba for *Théorème*, at the Comédie Française. Once I knew that he

was on board, I fleshed out his character. I also really wanted to film Laurent Stocker, whom I knew well from theatre, and who seemed ideal to play Léa's father, the man who is unmasked by Souhila. As for Gustave Kervern, I thought of him because I like his cool demeanor, his gentleness, and his melancholy.

How did you come up with the editing, based on jump cuts?

I worked with Gueric Catala, an editor really attuned to storytelling and to actors. Together we tried to create a rhythm using the accelerating and magnifying effects of jump cuts. We relied on those swings to make the audience feel how Mehdi navigates through life's ups and downs, but ends up in over his head. We wanted to convey that he is not in control of the events at all, but rather that he is being tossed about, overwhelmed, which arouses empathy for him.

The use of strings and the rhythm of Amine Bouhafa's score create a kind of ebb and flow of memory. Did you give him some guidelines for the soundtrack?

There are many dialogues in the film, so the music had to express everything that Mehdi cannot say or name. Amine Bouhafa and I did not want comedy music, but rather a more melancholic score. Amine's music adds depth to the characters and situations.

As for the additional pieces of music, I wanted all of them to be linked to Algeria, and to connect different generations of artists who are important to me. In Souhila's bar, you can hear Oran-born singer Cheb Hasni, who was murdered in 1994, at the age of twenty-six, during Algeria's Black Decade. He was Algeria's soul. He sang about youth, love, always expressing warmth, whether through laughter or tears. You can also hear the new generation of raï singers, such as Cheb Bello and Chebba Chinou. Or, in a different category, Algerian rapper Tif.

And on the train, Souhila gets everyone dancing to the music of Acid Arab, featuring Algerian singer Sofiane Saïdi. Raï music, which is part of the tradition, blends with rap and electro. This scene on the train feels like a metaphor to me: Souhila is making France dance. Under the current circumstances, it seems all the more relevant.





AMINE ADJINA

Trained as an actor, Amine Adjina has performed in theatre for numerous directors, most recently Alexandra Badea and Sébastien Kheroufi, and in cinema for Sébastien Lifshitz.

A director and author, he runs the Compagnie du Double with Emilie Prévosteau, where they create shows. Several of his plays have been published by Actes Sud-Papiers. He was awarded the Beaumarchais Grant in 2017 for *Arthur and Ibrahim*. In 2023, he co-directed his play *Théorème / Je me sens un cœur à aimer toute la terre* at the Comédie-Française.

A graduate of La Fémis screenwriting workshop (a renowned film school in France), he wrote and directed his first feature film, *La petite cuisine de Mehdi* (aka *Spices and Lies*), in 2024.

ORAN-STYLE VEAL BLANQUETTE

FOR 8 PEOPLE

INGREDIENTS

Veal shoulder or neck	3 lbs
Carrots	0.44 lbs
Onions	0.44 lbs
Leak whites	0.22 lbs
Celery stalks	1 bunch
Mixed herbs	0.13 lbs
Butter	1.455 lbs
Flour	0,2 l
Thick cream	x2
Egg yolks	

ORAN-STYLE GARNISH

Small onions	0.44 lbs
Button mushrooms	0.55 lbs
Dried apricots	0.33 lbs
Flaked almonds	0.22 lbs
Chopped fresh coriander	1 bunch
Lemon (juice)	½

Coarse salt, fine salt, white pepper, ras el hanout, cloves

1 | PREPARE THE MEAT

Trim, cut and remove fat from veal pieces.

2 | BLANCH THE MEAT

Bring to boil for a few minutes, then rinse with cold water.

3 | PREPARE THE AROMATIC GARNISH

Peel, wash and chop carrots, onions, and celery. Stud an onion.

4 | COOK THE BLANQUETTE

Put the meat, aromatic garnish, and bouquet garni in a cooking pot. Moisten with hot white stock.

Add salt, bring to boil, skim, and let it simmer for ~1 h 30.

5 | PREPARE WHITE ROUX

Melt the butter, add the flour, cook without browning. Moisten with the cooking stock to get a creamy velouté. Cook gently for ~10 min.

6 | PREPARE THE ORAN-STYLE GARNISH

Glaze the small onions. Turn and slice the mushrooms, add lemon juice, cover and cook over moderate heat for 5 minutes.

Rehydrate the apricots in a little hot water or white stock.

Dry roast the flaked almonds. Finely chop the coriander.

7 | PREPARE THE LIAISON

Separate the eggs, mix yolks with cream. Put aside, off the heat.

8 | FINISH THE SAUCE

Thicken the velouté with the egg-cream liaison (off the heat). Wisk, return to low heat, without boiling. Check seasoning.

9 | PLATE THE BLANQUETTE

Mix the meat with the sauce, add the apricots. Arrange in a dome, garnish with the mushrooms, onions, toasted almonds.

Scatter fresh coriander leaves right before serving.



FILM SCORES

« *Fi Hawmt Tayh* »

Played by Abdou Gambetta
(Abderahmane Belarbi)
© & © Abdou Gambetta

« *Je t'aime encore* »

Played by Cheb Nani
(Amari Mohamed)
© & © Lazer Productions

« *Sbart ou tal adabi* »

Played by Cheb Hasni
(Hasni Chakroun)
© & © 2003 MLP

« *Manich kima bakri* »

Played by Cheb Bello
(Moulay Boumediene)
© & © DJ MOULAY

« *Hinata* »

Played by TIF
(Toufik Bouhraoua / Khalil Cherradi)
© 2023 HSH (Houma Sweet Houma)
© HSH

« *La Hafla* »

Acid Arab feat. Sofiane Saidi
(Kenzi BOURRAS, Hervé CARVALHO, Pierre-Yves CASANOVA,
Guido CESARSKY, Sofiane SAIDI)
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« *Bent kartier populaire* »

Played by Cheba Chinou
(Lakhdar Ghezzali, Hammadi Houari)
©&© Lakhdar Ghezzali & Houari Hammadi

« *Tal Ghiyabek* »

Played by Cheb Hasni
(Hasni Chakroun)
© & © 1992 MLP



CAST

Younès BOUCIF

Clara BRETHERAU

Hiam ABBASS

Gustave KERVERN

Birane BA from the Comédie Française

Malika ZERROUKI

Laurent STOCKER from the Comédie Française

Agathe DRONNE

Inès BOUKHELIFA

Horya BENABET

Kenza LAGNAOUI

Lou-Adriana BOUZIOUANE

Nina ZEM

MEHDI

LÉA

SOUHILA

BERNARD

IBRAHIM

FATIMA

CHRISTOPHE

SYLVIE

FAIZA

YASMINE

SORAYA

LINDA

AMEL

CREW

DIRECTION
SCREENPLAY
PRODUCTION
IMAGE
EDITING
ORIGINAL MUSIC
PRODUCTION MANAGER
CASTING
1ST ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
CONTINUITY
SOUND
SOUND EDITING
MIX
SET DESIGN
COSTUME DESIGNER
MAKE-UP & HAIR STYLING
UNIT MANAGER

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ALEXIA MONTEGU
MAXIME GAVAUDAN
RAPHAËL MOUTERDE, JONAS ORANTIN
SAMUEL AÏCHOUN
MICHEL SCHMITT
MARTA ROSSI
HERMA HAMZAOUI
VALENTIN BOURGUET

EX NIHILO
AUVERGNE-RHÔNE-ALPES CINÉMA
LA RÉGION AUVERGNE-RHÔNE-ALPES, LA RÉGION PROVENCE-ALPES-CÔTE
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