

MICHELE RAY-GAVRAS PRESENTS



I STILL
A MON ÂGE
JE ME CACHE
ENCORE
POUR FUMER
HIDE
TO SMOKE

في عمري ما زلتني تتخبأ باش تتكيّف

Written and directed by **RAYHANA**

HIAM ABBASS
FADILA BELKEBLA
NADIA KACI
NASSIMA BENCHICOU
SARAH LAYSSAC
MAYMOUNA
LINA SOUALEM
FAROUDJA AMAZIT

and
BIYOUNA as Aïcha



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FRANCE / GREECE / ALGERIA • IH30 • SOUND 5.1 • DCP 2K / SCOPE COLOR



A hammam in turmoil, cigarettes on the sly, the fat and the skinny, gales of laughter, dreams of a dazzling wedding, forgotten false teeth, calls to prayer, a head masseuse, a picky matchmaker, an expat dressed like a blondie, kids bawling, beards growing, a love song, love for your man, men's love for their mothers, inappropriate spermatozooids,

a pregnant virgin, a princess married age 10, a cuckolded husband, a virginity certificate, a festive divorce, a bush to shave, a bomb in the water tank, open-tops and cover-ups, an assassin brother, acid burns, a hooded plumber, a pussy on fire, solitary pleasures, butts and burqas, the Bible and the Koran... before the flash of a dagger and the silence of God.



DIRECTOR'S NOTE

The hamman is – necessarily - the location of this film: a place for a cathartic stripping-off, from both a philosophical and ancestral perspective. In my society, the hamman is one of the few places where a woman can go without reprimands. Except for the Islamists, who suddenly decided that the hammam is also “Hram” (*unclean*), as a place of nudity: a woman should show her body only to her husband.

The seeds of this idea were sown in Algeria at the beginning of the '90s: on 21st June 1990, the FIS (*Islamic Salvation Front*) had a landslide victory in the local elections, the first “free and democratic” elections in Algerian history, after the authorities introduced multi-party democracy to calm the revolt of the “Arab Spring”: October 1988 was the **first Arab Spring** in history. Over 400 people died in the five days of rioting.

The FIS didn't play the role of a political party, with a clear political and economic program, but rather that of a weapon against a system that the Algerian people wanted to change, whatever the cost, following whoever shouted loudest. Social and political injustice, poverty, colossal debt and the IMF reformers, intellectual poverty and the promise of a pseudo-democracy combined to embellish the obscurantist, retrograde, backward message of the FIS in the eyes of the people.

The first Islamist rules the FIS legislated in the towns it controlled were those against women, now public enemy number 1: “*Women are the root of evil, the cause of decadence in the world, a scourge that must be contained. They are the cause of unemployment, they must be veiled, and sent back home...*” No more mixed schools, hospitals, queues for the bakery or at

the bus stop... a wave of aberration and violence against us. Acts of violence were perpetrated against those men and women who refused to respect their laws. It was then that I realized that we, women, had even more to lose than the men. And that in our battle since independence for equal rights - a battle far from victory - the lightning ascendancy of the fundamentalists meant our future was headed for the darkness of the past.

I had written already, but in Algerian Arabic. For the Béjaia theater, that I'd joined as an actress after my training at the Institute of Dramatic Art, and where I worked until August 1999 when I had to go into exile. A few adaptations including Tom Stoppard's *"Every Good Boy Deserves Favour"*, which ran after I had left. *"Fita Bent el Alouen"* which I wrote and directed, won *"Best Theater Piece"* at the Festival of Alger. Apart from poetry in Arabic and French, I hadn't written that much. I was an actress, and that's what I loved. *"At My Age..."* is my first work written in French.

I didn't just leave Algeria one day, I went into exile. That's how you describe it when you've become a potential target, right? I wrote the play two years after going into exile. I had an urgent, overriding need to bear witness, to cry out, facing the West, deaf and blind, playing at ignorance: *"Who's killing who?"*. Repeated in the media, that phrase questioned us to death, while the terrorists pranced about in full view in London and Paris, boasting of their crimes... They were invited to TV talk shows, given visas, political asylum, money to fund assassinating us. I will never forgive the French government for refusing a visa to that leading figure of Algerian theater, Azzedine Medjoubi, director, actor, and Director of the National Theater, executed soon after, coming out of the theater in Algiers, in Rue Molière... Writing lifts the weight of guilt while bombs and savage hordes are still terrorizing my people. Entire villages massacred, adults and children raped, disemboweled, throats cut with a saw....

My characters are inspired by women that I have known, or not. My sister, in love with a man who didn't reveal his attachment to God and



everything consequent on that until they were married. My neighbor, who her husband beat on any pretext. A grandmother married aged 8 to a man thirty years older, who however didn't "sample" her until she reached puberty... My life as a teenage girl dreaming of a Prince Charming who would take me sailing out to sea, then my life as a student and militant.

Zahia, the fundamentalist, is inspired by my best friend who came from a family of left-wing intellectual militants. She introduced me to Marxist philosophy. She gave me THE book which opened my eyes: *Politzer's "Elementary Principles of Philosophy"*, on idealism and materialism. A revelation. We lost contact. One day, during the dark years, in a street in Bab el Oued, I recognized a beautiful face encircled by a black niqab. It was my friend. The one who gave me the book. I couldn't believe it: she told me about her beloved who opened her eyes to Islam, God and the positive aspects of jihad, about her parents whom she had repudiated as unbelievers... My protagonists are a mix-n-match of slices of Algerian, Mediterranean life...

After receiving a creative writing grant from the National Theater Center, my text was chosen for a public reading at the Tuesday midday reading series of the Theatre du Rond Point in Paris. The reading was directed by Fabian Chappuis, and read by actresses who then took part in the

performance at the Métallos cultural center in Paris. At the end of the reading a middle-aged lady, who seemed “native French” came up to me. “Madame, I thought I was coming to see Arab women, but I saw myself there.” I didn’t capture the full import of her phrase until after the success of the play created at the Métallos center on 9th December 2009. The director of the Métallos wanted me to direct the play. I didn’t feel ready, I felt Fabian had done a great job. With wonderful actresses.

Three weeks later, Michèle and Costa came to see the play. The next day, at a friend’s house, with a coffee, wrapped in the thick smoke of my cigarettes that I smoked one after the other, Michèle declared:

- You have to adapt it as a film.
- Only you can do it, it’s your story.
- Talent is born, technique can be learned.
- And you have to shoot in Arabic.

Six months later she admitted that cigarette smoke gave her migraines, but she didn’t ask me to put them out because she wanted to convince me!

Six years after we met, we’re mixing the film, and I saw the play once more. I was relieved. I think - personally anyhow! - that I succeeded with this challenge. My film is a film. The play is theater.

The play - necessarily in French - could not have existed otherwise. The film, in Arabic, is a necessary artistic and ethical choice embodying the veracity and authenticity of what is said. Given the difficulty of finding actresses, I admit sometimes I backed off from this choice, suggesting to Michèle that we should shoot in French. Thank you, Michèle, for hanging in there!

RAYHANA

RAYHANA

Born in Bab El Oued, a traditionally working-class neighborhood of Algiers, Rayhana left Algeria several years ago and now lives and works in France. After studying at the Algerian National Institute for Fine Arts, then at the Algerian National Institute for Dramatic and Choreographic Arts, Rayhana joined the Béjaïa national theater company initially as an actor, then as a writer and director. She appeared in numerous films and television dramas before moving on to direct the plays she had written. She has received numerous awards at various Algerian festivals including Best Actress (*Batna Festival*), Best Theater Piece (*Béjaïa Festival*), Best Actress (*Annaba Festival*), and Special Jury Prize (*Carthage Festival, Tunisia*). “**I STILL HIDE TO SMOKE**” is her first play written in French. In January 2011 she published “**LE PRIX DE LA LIBERTÉ**” (“*The Price of Freedom*”) ed. Flammarion.



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MICHELE RAY-GAVRAS

PRODUCER

WHY?

A long journey!

I saw the play at Maison des Métallos in Paris, when it opened. People were talking about the play, but also about the playwright, Rayhana, and that she had been attacked with methylated spirits by two young bearded extremists.

Intrigued, I went to see this play that was arousing such violence. I was deeply moved, as was the audience, by the strength of the play, and the way in which Rayhana spoke of destinies which were sometimes tragic with a lightness of touch, a profound generosity, so much love for these women.

The very next day, in a smoke-filled room - my eyes and throat still hurt at the thought - I suggested:

- producing an adaptation of the play for the cinema
- in Arabic, obviously
- adapted and directed by the only person who could do that, namely

Rayhana.

Sweeping aside her objections: "technique can be learned, but not talent!" Rayhana and I discussed the scenario in great depth... although I don't write... but wielded the "red pencil" that helped her hone the first scripts from over 250 pages.... I knew it would take time, but I was never worried: Rayhana "saw" her film in images, she had talent, I could feel it. She had worked on films - Mehdi, Costa, Salem - so she had an instinct for working on set - learning what to do... or not to do!

WHERE?

Why shoot a story which takes place in Algiers in a Bab el Oued hamman in an Ottoman hammam in Salonica?

Because Ottoman hammams are the most beautiful and most cinematographic,



I typed "Ottoman hammam" into the internet. A lot popped up in Turkey... but with the same problem of nudity for the extras as in Algeria. I type "Ottoman hammam in Greece", since Greece was occupied for four centuries by the Ottoman Empire.

Two magnificent examples. One on the Isle of Lesbos, and Salonica. Salonica!

Even before going on the recce with Rayhana I knew we would shoot there.

Fifty years after Z... shooting a story which takes place in Algiers in Salonica, while for Z, the story which took place in Salonica was shot in Algiers.

It was a sign from fate which I couldn't ignore!

And shooting in Greece during a difficult time is also a gesture of solidarity.

HOW?

A detailed period of preparation with Rayhana alone in the hammam with her shooting script, head in hands, pacing up and down...

A French-Greek crew, all women. The extras and the actresses could feel at ease without a male gaze on them, their cellulite, their falling breasts.

This mix of collaborators, extras, French, Algerian, Greek, Afghan, Syrian, Egyptian actresses, Greek, Egyptian, Afghan, Algerian, men... that was the film, that's the story of I Still Hide... From Greece to Algeria, the whole Mediterranean... and a fundamental universality. ■



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SHOOTING LOCATION

Bey Hamam, alternatively known as the “Baths of Paradise”, is a Turkish bathhouse located along Egnatia Street in Thessaloniki, east of Panagia Chalkeon. Built in 1444 by sultan Murad II, it was the first Ottoman bath in Thessaloniki and the most important one still standing throughout Greece. For this reason, it is a part of those few important vestiges of Ottoman culture remaining in Thessaloniki and Greece in general. It is a double bath, with two separate parts for men and women. The male quarters are the most spacious and luxurious, but each one follows the same tripartite plan - a succession of three parts, the cold, tepid, and hot rooms. A large rectangular cistern flanks the baths to the east and guarantees their water supply.

The baths for the men include a large octagonal cold room, with a gallery resting on columns, arcades surrounding their windows, and a painted cupola. It is followed, in south-east, by the tepid room, also octagonal, equipped with a cupola with oculi and with a rich series of painted depictions of plants. Further to the east lies the complex of hot rooms, ordered around a large cruciform room, wherein the massage table might always be found, standing, now as ever, in its centre. Eight small hot and tepid rooms open on this space and are equipped with basins and marble benches.

The baths remained in usage, under the name “Baths of Paradise”, up until 1968, where they were leased to the Greek archaeological service for four years. After the 1978 Thessaloniki earthquake, which shook Thessaloniki especially hard, the baths were restored, and are used to this day for cultural events and short-lived exhibitions. Meanwhile, the eastern annex became the principal shop of the Foundation of Archaeological Receipts of the Hellenic Republic Ministry of Culture. ■

source Wikipedia



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THE ACTRESSES

FATIMA / HIAM ABBASS



Fatima, already old at 50, head masseuse for years, she takes the boss's place in her absence. She's mother of 5 children with a brutal man whom she despises and endures. Always in a hurry to get to the hammam, her haven of peace, where before the clients arrive she purifies her sexual organs after daily rape by her husband. She can then finally smoke right to the butt her first cigarette, that she smokes in secret. "It soothes my head." A woman who runs the hammam with a firm hand, loved and feared by all, crude and direct in her speech. "No politics in the hammam! All of you, just clean the dirt off your own butts, God damn it!" She doesn't understand either why young men leave for Europe beardless and return bearded and fanatical. It drives her crazy! Her day is thrown off course by the arrival of little Meriem, pregnant and about to give birth. Without anyone seeing, Fatima hides Meriem in the depths of the hammam to protect her from her brother Mohamed who has returned from France to kill her, her and her bastard child.

☛ I first saw and loved Hiam Abbas in the film "Les Citronniers". I contacted her for the play, but unfortunately the dates didn't match her schedule. I had no idea at the time that I was going to make a film. But I knew our paths would cross. And during the reading Michèle suggested Hiam. Hiam who comes from a land of all conflicts has, like Fatima, her feet on the ground. Humble, talented, hard-working. She brilliantly mastered the accent, Algiers mixed with the province of Constantine. Very far from Palestinian Arabic.

SAMIA / FADILA BELKEBLA



Candid and skinny, Samia, at 29 and a half, knows nothing of life. She lives entirely in her dreams, haunted by an "ex-pat" who will come to free her from her parents' control. They took her out of school very young: "You'll leave here to go to your husband's house and from your husband's house to the grave". Samia, still a virgin, pleasures herself alone. And dares to say so to Nadia. Innocent victim of the revengeful fury of Meriem's brother, like the Pied Piper of Hamelin, she leaves, taking with her all the black headscarves, across the Bay of Algiers. "Because I love you, my little Leïla."

☛ Impossible! I needed an actress who was skinny, I mean, really skinny, speaking fluent Algerian Arabic, totally fearless about showing her body and - above all - about

speaking these words. Fear of reprisals, religious convictions, what will people think... one or all of these reasons meant no Algerian actress living in Algeria could or wished to play this role. Months of casting. And suddenly, the *rara avis*, a red flower in her luxurious curly black hair, Fadela Belkebla, beautiful in her slenderness and simplicity, a frank laugh, no taboos. At the start, her Kabyle accent burned my ears! Then, through willpower and hard work, her dialogues looping on her iPod everywhere she went, with the amicable assistance of Hiam and of Nadia Kaci, Fadila became Samia.

KELTOUM / NADIA KACI



Keloum, a teacher, a modern, courageous woman, in love with her husband, happy in her marriage, even though they haven't been able to have children. She loves making love, and says so loud and clear. Keltoum loves little Leïla, Fatima's niece, who became mute following the savage massacre of her whole family by a gang of Islamists.... "You know why she shakes when you invoke God? Because when they were raping her sisters and disemboweling her pregnant mother, those animals were chanting the Quran!". She wears the veil since she received death threats via a pupil, an 8-year old brat sent by a self-proclaimed "Imam" from the neighboring mosque.

☛ Nadia Kaci is an exceptional actress. One of the very few Algerian artists, women, who have had the courage to shatter taboos in so many films... For Nadia, acting is itself defending ideas, taking responsibility for your choices. Like *Biyouna* she's an exile, the target of death threats. Her magnificent book of testimonies "Laissées pour mortes" ("Left for dead") underscores her commitment. Nadia - intuitive, gifted, perfectionist. I know our paths will cross again.

ZAHIA / NASSIMA BENCHICOU



Zahia, widow of a self-proclaimed "emir", murderer, leader of an Islamist terrorist group which spread terror, sparing neither women nor children. She has raised her children to revere their dead father as a martyr: Zahia will try to justify her husband's crimes, but Fatima brings her down to earth: "Zahia, your husband is just one more corpse devoured by worms, like his victims lying beside him". Polite, educated, an ex-medical student, Zahia will help Aïcha as Meriem goes into labor. Fatima and Nadia's fears recede. But Zahia will ultimately take sides..

☛ Beautiful, intelligent, and an outstanding actress, Nassima embodies the full complexity of the character. I met her at a friend's casting session. She was blond with

blue eyes. It never occurred to me she was Algerian. And the daughter of a friend, an important journalist and writer, the target of death threats, forced to go into exile with his whole family. Nassima, with her sweet, childish face is exactly who I was seeking to play Zahia. I wanted her to resemble all these young French girls who radicalize overnight.

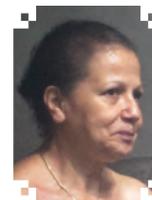
NADIA / SARAH LAYSSAC



Nadia doesn't mince her words. Her guiding principle is the struggle against obscurantism. Her sworn enemy is Zahia the fundamentalist. As a rebellious student she paid a high price for her secularism: burned with acid by bearded peers at university because she was wearing a skirt and not a "tent". Nadia has recently become Aïcha's ex-daughter-in-law. To whom she will finally confess that she was taking the pill to avoid bearing Aïcha's son's child. She looked up to him at the start, but then "oh, how he shrank, he shrank". Nadia waves her divorce papers like a standard: "Girls, here's my certificate of independence!"

☛ Nadia is me. Sarah Leyssac is Nadia. Michèle and I knew it the first time we met her in a casting session. She lives in France. A curvy model and singer in a rock group. She'd only acted once in a film, for a mutual friend in Algiers. But she was already burning up the screen.

LOUISA / MAYMOUNA



A housewife, convivial, illiterate but modern, married age 10 to a friend of her father forty years older, who gave her sweets. "I felt a dagger tearing into me, ripping deep into my wound..." Despite her suffering, her view of the world hasn't altered, and she thinks that education and study could bring change. Proud of her youngest daughter studying at university "My daughter will do what she wishes, as she wishes, even if I die and go to hell for it". She'll also confess a deep secret. Her children's father... is her brother-in-law. "He really loved me. For ten years. Then he left, and France swallowed him up."

☛ Not a professional actress, the wife of a great journalist and writer who received death threats from the Islamists for his writing, forced to flee together with their children into exile. Maymouna is the mother of Nassima Benchicou (Zahia). A French teacher, she came just to read the lines for us for the part of Louisa during our script reading, with all the actresses around a table. A very big table! Maymouna knocked us out. Her gentleness, her beautiful speech, her intelligence, her tactful humor, but no-one dared say "this is our Louisa!"

MERIEM / LINA SOUALEM



Meriem, *Mary in Arabic*, 16 years old, as pregnant as can be, sets the narrative arc of the film. Drama arrives with her. Pursued by her brother Mohamed who has dashed over from France, keen to cleanse his honor with the blood of his sister and her bastard, Meriem has come to seek refuge in the hammam, the only place forbidden to men, shielded by the taboo of women bathing. Her brother doesn't believe the legend of a "belly" caught by going to the men's corner of the Hammam. Risking her life, Fatima takes on a mission: "I don't give a damn where or how, no-one has the right to lay a finger on her, period!"

☛ Michèle and I saw Lina in "Héritage" ("Heritage"), directed by her mother Hiam Abbass (Fatima). Her youthful, porcelain skin, rosy cheeks, reminded us of images of the Virgin Mary, Meriem in Arabic. So moving to see Hiam advising her during the shoot, holding her in her arms, wiping away her tears and sweat, proud as a mother watching the performance of her child.

MADAME MOUNI / FAROUDJA AMAZIT



Madame Mouni, the immigrant returned to the "village", is looking for a wife for her son: a virgin, veiled, pious, a good cook, a perfect homemaker... Straight from the good wife handbook. She has the showy ways of a woman who has succeeded in her life in France. An "integrated" manner of speech. As Nadia puts it: "A brunette dressed up as a blonde". She speaks polished, affected Parisian French. You'd almost believe it. She could pass for a liberated, modern French woman, if it weren't for her request for a virgin for her son.

☛ The author of books on immigrant women, she works at Dior. She's a friend, born in France of Kabyle Algerian parents who immigrated in the 60s. I have known Madame Mounis who come back to Algeria, to the "village" as they put it, flaunting their loot from French bargain stores. Faroudja is not a Madame Mouni, but I wanted this slightly precious, naive quality that Faroudja has naturally.

MOHAMED / FETHI GALLEZE



☛ An ex-footballer from Algiers, Fethi left his homeland for love, of a young Greek woman. I met him at a casting in Thessaloniki: his look, his "rogue seducer" side, his popular accent and above all his "honey-colored eyes" as Samia would say, were perfectly aligned with the character of Mohamed as I imagined him.

And BIYOUONA as AÏCHA

Aïcha is religious and observant, although her Islam is totally pagan - as for the majority of Algerians. Deeply rooted in ancestral tradition, a Mediterranean mother figure, possessive, and perpetuating for other women what she herself suffered. But as the local midwife "and proud of it", her heart - as a woman, a mother - softens, and it becomes a matter of honor for her that the birth of Myriam's child unfolds as it should. Aïcha "knows" you can get pregnant by going into the men's area, without any sexual relations. It's written in the Quran: "*Mary the Virgin (Meriem in Arabic) gave birth to Jesus, Allah breathing life into him...*"

☛ Who other than Biyouna, the diva, my longstanding friend, could incarnate Aïcha, this colorful, frank, sarcastic character. Nobody. Towards the end of the dark years, Biyouna, the most popular actress in Algeria had to reluctantly go into exile, fleeing death. With her humor, her inimitable accent, she recounts the day she escaped death thanks to her popularity: falling into the hands of the terrorists at a fake roadblock, their "emir" recognized her. He laughed and let her go, ordering her to never come that way again... I admit only Biyouna's feminist commitment, and her admiration for the films produced by Michèle, convinced her to accept the deal we could offer. But with her habitual humor and joie de vivre, she merely remarked: "I thought charity was dead! But since it's for you, girls..."



CREW

DIRECTED BY **RAYHANA**

PRODUCED BY **MICHELE RAY-GAVRAS**

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EXECUTIVE PRODUCER ALGERIA **SALEM BRAHIMI**

PRODUCTION MANAGER **TATIANA VERBI, AUDREY FIMOGNARI,
AHMED IMERZOUKENE**

WRITTEN BY **RAYHANA**

ORIGINAL MUSIC **ANNE-SOPHIE VERSNAEYEN**

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D.O.P **OLYMPIA MYTILINAIOU** (*hammam*), **MOHAMED TAYEB-
LAGGOUNE** (*Algeria*)

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EDITING **RAYHANA - ASSISTANT NASSIM OUADI**

SOUND **MARIANNE ROUSSY-MOREAU, JÉRÔME GONTHIER,
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