

Strand Releasing presents

A film by ABDELLAH TAÏA

SALVATION ARMY

Starring Said Mrini, Karim Ait M'hand and Amine Ennaji

Winner, Outfest Los Angeles LGBT Film Festival

*Official Selection:
Venice Film Festival
New Directors/New Films
Toronto International Film Festival*

Country of Origin: France/Morocco/Switzerland

Format: DCP/1.85/Color

Sound Format: Dolby 5.1 SRD

Running Time: 84 minutes

Genre: Drama

Not Rated

In French and Arabic with English Subtitles

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SYNOPSIS

Abdellah is a young gay man navigating the sexual, racial and political climate of Morocco. Growing up in a large family in a working-class neighborhood, Abdellah is caught between a distant father, an authoritarian mother, an older brother whom he adores and a handful of predatory older men, in a society that denies his homosexuality. As a college student, Abdellah moves to Geneva and while faced with the new possibilities of freedom, he grapples with the loss of his homeland. *SALVATION ARMY*, the directorial debut for Abdellah Taïa – an acclaimed Moroccan and Arab writer - is adapted from his novel of the same name. Taïa is the first writer of his descent to speak out openly about his homosexuality.

DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHY – ABDELLAH TAÏA

Abdellah Taïa (39) is the first Moroccan and Arab writer to have openly come out about his homosexuality. He is the author of *An Arab melancholia* (2008), *Le jour du Roi* (Prix de Flore 2010) and *Infidels* (2012), all published by Le Seuil Editions. *SALVATION ARMY*, adapted from his eponymous novel, is his first full-length feature movie. His novels are translated into several languages.

THE EIGHT QUESTIONS: Q&A WITH DIRECTOR ABDELLAH TAÏA

1) What led you to filmmaking?

First and foremost, Egyptian movies. Generally, Arab people are always connected to artistic works produced in Egypt, such as movies, series and songs. As a boy, I discovered all of it on television and I learned to like the images, the people who spoke in Arabic, my language. This Egyptian obsession clearly led me to film-making and to linking my Moroccan reality, my large, moneyless family, to the reality of Egyptian movies. It helped me conduct a form of fusion, of transformation. Contrarily to what Western people may think, this type of cinema gave birth to great movies (and not only those directed by Youssef Chahine). Despite the prohibitions and the taboos, there was a certain idea of freedom and transgression that was expressed fully and prodigiously. The bodies of Egyptian actresses were my first lesson in artistic freedom. I admired them for their talent and for their audacity. In a way that was sometimes subtle and sometimes outrageous, they represented our political and social difficulties and our wish to move into action. Burn it all. Liberate ourselves. That's it: this is how I learned to decode movie images and particularly to create a vital, artistic and mysterious bond between them and me. Then I became a writer. Several of my novels have been published, all written in French. But my literary work was influenced by my Egyptian movie obsessions.

2) Incidentally, *SALVATION ARMY* (Ed. du Seuil, 2006) is originally one of your novels. How did you take on the movie adaptation?

I understood fairly quickly that I had to forget the book, and not even try to read it again. I needed to find a movie project that would follow the main line of the novel without necessarily trying to be faithful to it. It took me almost two years to do it. To go beyond

the novel. To objectivize a story that is mostly autobiographical. In other words, the hero (who also bears my name: Abdellah) had to emerge from a certain reality to find another: the movie reality. Abdellah is me. But not only. It was only when that work was done that I was able to write the screenplay, to “burn” the novel, free myself and the characters at the same time. The only thing I had to be faithful to was my vision of Morocco, of a Moroccan self that is impossible to construct freely.

3) The question of homosexuality is here set in a particular place: Morocco. How did the shooting go?

The movie confronts the question of homosexuality, but without trying to be scandalous. Its reality within a family, in the streets of a working-class neighborhood of Casablanca. Tensions were very strong during the shooting in Morocco. The Moroccan actors and technicians were fantastic. But attacks could come from anywhere. From a certain Moroccan press which incidentally tried to ban the shooting. From Islamists who, a month before, had violently demonstrated against a conference around my novels at El Jadida University (El Jadida is one of the cities where we shot the movie). From anyone in the street, who had heard about the nature of the project and the name of the movie director. So we had to constantly protect ourselves and make sure that the extreme daily tension would not turn into a major handicap.

4) The film depicts Morocco as it has never been depicted in movies before...

It was not only about getting away from the Moroccan clichés that are conveyed within and without the country. I had to show the naked truth, without concessions. The truth about Morocco. My own truth. I had to shoot characters who would express, almost without speaking, all the devastating ambiguities of this country. A true self is possible, but at what price? Homosexuality is here, inside and outside the house. But who will acknowledge that individuality? And what about the others? The hero of the movie is homosexual, but he is neither an innocent nor a victim. Like the other characters, he uses the same weapon: malignancy. More than the «problem» of homosexuality, this difficult legacy is what he will have to constantly face up to, in Casablanca or in Geneva. He will then have to cheat, manipulate and hurt people. A free individual is never pure... To get to this result, I recreated the Moroccan world, its codes and its threats, in the fairest and most accurate possible way.

5) How did your collaboration with Agnès Godard go?

I remember the extraordinary emotion I felt while watching, at the age of 24 in Morocco, Claire Denis’s movie *Nénette et Boni*, in which Agnès Godard was director of photography. I then told myself: “If I ever become a film director, I will call on Agnès Godard...” An innocent dream, maybe. Which came true with my first full-length movie. Apart from the great admiration I have for her, working with her is striking. Her intensity, her involvement and high standards... It’s not easy, of course. But that’s all for the better. Nothing at all is easy with film-making anyway. You choose someone and accept them as they are. She helped me enormously in my desire to shoot my own Morocco, in my very personal way, far from the usual picture. And talking with her,

before or during the shooting, always had a special taste: it was serious and childish at the same time, very deep and also very light.

6) How did you find the two actors who play Abdellah's role?

Karim Aït M'Hand is a French actor of Moroccan origin, I found him in Paris. He was the first one to turn up at the casting. He came to my place. I opened the door and immediately saw that he was the character. He could impersonate Abdellah's dark side, almost without doing anything. I was convinced of it. I saw other comedians for that role, but each time he was a far better choice. As for the young Saïd Mrini, who plays Abdellah at 15, I found him in Casablanca, only three months before we started shooting. I got sort of struck by him, and I wasn't the only one in the crew. He told us he had wanted to become an actor from the age of seven. I didn't rehearse a lot with the actors. I wanted to keep some suspense up, not spoil it all before D-day. But I saw them a lot before the shooting, I had them meet several times. We ate together. We talked together. On the set, may not look alike but they both have a face that perfectly expresses opacity. They are inscrutable, impenetrable. This is what I wanted to express in the movie: a world where things cannot be understood at once.

7) Did the recent events in the Arab world have an influence on the movie?

Necessarily, and even in an unconscious way, the revolutionary spirit that is currently shaking the Arab world has entered the movie, whether I wished it or not. We are indeed witnessing the big awakening of the Arab, political and individual. He is looking at himself, diagnosing himself and most importantly, criticizing himself. For the Arabs, freedom is no longer a fantasy, a Western idea, it is now set in all their hearts. The extreme divergences and the violence that goes with them are inevitable. The Arab body was sick, it is now healing. Cinema must take part in this historical movement. Personally, I feel comforted in my aspirations. I am an Arab homosexual, and I am not the only one. I am no longer alone. Claims for individual freedom, obviously including those of homosexuals, are part of this revolution. Despite the numerous uncertainties, the Arabs are seriously beginning to hope...

8) SALVATION ARMY is an openly autobiographical movie. Your hero even bears your first name. How did you grow up in Morocco, as a homosexual?

When I was a teenager, any signs of a well-accepted homosexuality were absent from real life and from Arab movies... Homosexuality was constantly associated with mental illness, social shame, a sin. To survive I had to make up my own cultural codes. I had to convince myself I had that right. The exclusion and the solitude were not always easy to bear. Much later, at the age of twenty, I discovered secondary characters who bore some signs of homosexuality in movies by Youssef Chahine, Salah Abou Seif or Yousry Nassrallah. But they were not totally in the light. Something was missing... In the collective Arab mind, there is no homosexual hero.

CAST

Said Mrini
Karim Ait M'Hand
Slimane

Young Abdellah
Adult Abdellah
Amine Ennaji

CREW

Writer/Director
Producers

Abdellah Taïa
Hugues Charbonneau
Marie-Ange Luciani
Philippe Martin
Pauline Gygax

Director of Photography
First Assistant
Editor
Sound Mixer
Sound Editor
Rerecording Sound Mixer

Agnés Godard
Guillaume Bonnier
Françoise Tourmen
Henri Maïkoff
Fanny Martin
Christophe Vingtrinier