

KAZAK PRODUCTIONS  
PRESENTS



GOLSHIFTEH FARAHANI

# Arab Blues

A FILM BY  
MANELE LABIDI



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2019 - FRANCE - FRENCH - 88' - DCP - 5.1





## SYNOPSIS

Selma, a psychoanalyst, deals with a cast of colourful new patients after returning home to Tunisia to open a practice.



## DIRECTOR'S INTERVIEW

**ARAB BLUES** is your first feature film. Prior to making it, you worked in other areas. What made you want to make movies?

Movies have always been a part of my life. The images, the actors, the stories and the energy in the theatre have always had an almost mystical effect on me. But the idea of making a career of it came later. I grew up in a modest family of Tunisian immigrants, far removed from the world of cinema and from culture in the general sense. When I was young, choosing an artistic career was a major transgression that I was incapable of making. Instead, I studied "reassuring" subjects like political science and economics, then landed a great job in a big bank. Once I'd checked those things off the list and any material anxiety and insecurity had dissipated, I felt a huge emptiness. I started writing again, taking out old texts and outlines of scripts that I'd worked on during my studies. My need to make films became evident. I ditched everything so I could start over from scratch. (Although later, I realized you never really start from scratch; every experience comes in handy at one point or another). I began teaching myself filmmaking. I pored over hundreds of books, contacted people who were closely or remotely connected to cinema, tried things out with my little camera; and wrote a lot. I discovered the work of actors through French actress Isabelle Carré, whom I was fortunate enough to assist for a few months when she was directing a play I had adapted for the theatre. It was a revelation. I knew that directing actors would be at the heart of my work.

**What was the genesis of this project?**

This project was born out of two relatively separate events. The first goes back a few years, to when I told my mother I was undergoing analysis. Once we got past the explanations, I found myself dealing with a

woman who felt betrayed. How dare I tell everything to a stranger? Deconstruct my past, my education, talk about her and our family, and pay good cash for it, to top it all off? At that price, my mother even offered to be my shrink! The second event was a real game-changer: the 2011 Tunisian Revolution and the impact it had on the Tunisians I ran into several months later. I've always seen Tunisia as a powerful cinematic force, with its landscapes, light and the complexity of its inhabitants. They're at the crossroads of two cultures, Arab-Muslim and Mediterranean. I knew my first film would take place in Tunis - a significant location in my own story - and this film is a declaration of love to my parents' homeland.

**Your film shows Tunisian society in full effervescence, in the midst of major cultural, economic and social changes. Why was it important to set the action after this historical shift?**

After the revolution, the country suddenly became "chatty" after decades of dictatorship. Going to get a loaf of bread could take two hours, what with the baker's uncontrollable urge to express himself, tell me about his regrets and past frustrations and give me his opinion about where the country should go from here. Words were coming thick and fast, spurred on by questions surrounding the country's future, the looming economic crisis and the spectre of Islamic extremism. I understood that the revolution had had an impact on the population's psyche. The abrupt fall of the dictatorship had plunged the country into chaos and uncertainty, provoking anxiety and depression in some people. The months following the revolution reminded me of the first months of psychotherapy. You're lost, you have to rebuild yourself, you're questioning everything. Then, gradually, things start to fall into place. That's where I got the idea for the French-





Tunisian psychotherapist, who would lend an ear with the distance of an outsider but also the motivation of someone who has come to contribute to the reconstruction of her origin country.

### **You don't play up the East/West clash in your film. Why not?**

Psychotherapy and psychoanalysis are still marginal and hard to access in Tunisia, but I don't think that's just because of some deep religious or cultural resistance. Those are of course factors, but I'm wary of essentialist theories about the Arab-Muslim world. Resistance to these disciplines is still found throughout the western world as well. I had no desire to surf the easy wave of "a foreigner coming to preach the good word to a naive, uneducated population." That's not reality. Demand for psychotherapy has risen among the middle and upper classes since the revolution, so to feed the cliché of a westernized shrink alone against a backwards population would've been crude and unfair. I wanted to focus on a young woman's brave plan to set up her practice in a country in turmoil, busy rebuilding itself socially, politically, economically and administratively.

### **Such subjects are often treated dramatically. Did comedy allow you to confront them more directly?**

Indeed, events of the past few decades have reduced us to terrorism, Islamism, repressive masculine figures and oppressed feminine figures. I wanted to use the tools of comedy to break out of this pattern and offer a different vision. Comedy allows us to treat serious subjects implicitly in an elegant and more distanced way. That gave me a great deal of freedom. Also, humour is an integral part of Tunisian culture. I would not have been true to the country's energy if I'd left it out of the film.

### **Are you especially attracted to comedy as a genre? Did any particular films influence ARAB BLUES?**

I love the comedy genre. It's very demanding, as much in the writing as in the timing (the rhythm is much like a musical score). It's also tricky to direct. I wanted to keep the direction subtle so the situations and the actors could shine. Italian comedies from the '60s and '70s were an important reference, as they treat social and political subjects through the lens of humour and satire. Comedies like *Le Pigeon*, *Marriage, Italian Style* and *Ugly, Dirty and Bad* have a hysteria, a vitality, an outrageousness - always laced with poetry and humanity - that really resonate with me and were like a metaphorical bridge to my Arab-Mediterranean culture. My choice of music in *Arab Blues* - notably the singer Mina who opens and closes the film - was obviously deliberate.

### **The character of Selma is quite atypical. She's out of step with her country and her family; she doesn't conform to what is expected of her. Was she inspired by your own experience, or the experiences of those around you?**

Selma is atypical even if you take her out of the Tunisian context. I wanted to create a "cowboy" character: taciturn, solitary, mysterious, virile, who does not see having a partner or a family as her salvation. But I wasn't aiming to make her a symbol of the liberated Arab woman either. She's comfortable with her choices. Cigarette dangling from her lips, she makes no apologies for who she is. Her actions, life choices and openness are her strengths. They set her free. And, though the film deals with psychotherapy, I made no attempt to "analyze" Selma. A few details slip in about her past, the deeper reasons she came to Tunisia, her relationships with men and her family, but there are no explanatory revelations. I want to let the viewer project freely onto this woman, as patients project onto their therapist. And finally, I wanted to use the character of Selma to explore my

own ambiguous relationship to this country I think I know, whose language I speak fluently, and yet from which I sometimes feel very removed, or even at odds with. My professional and personal choices, falling as they do outside of traditional frameworks, have confirmed the image my Tunisian family has always had of me: I'm a strange, unusual woman; crazy even, in the eyes of some. I wanted to tell that story from the inside, through my own bicultural, Franco-Tunisian lens.

### **How did Golshifteh Farahani get involved in the project? And what was it like working with her?**

The key word for casting this film was "standout", meaning we wanted to assemble a wide variety of "movie mugs" that would light up the screen with their presence. In addition to her subtle acting, I had a strong desire to work with her. She has exceptional cinematic power. Something strange happens when she's on screen. It's hard to explain, but to me it's a kind of magic. Selma's taciturn

nature required this level of charisma and fascination. Golshifteh's own life experiences also made her a natural for the role, as they resonate in many ways with those of my character. Indeed, she approached the role very instinctively and emotionally. Being able to work with such an actor on my first film was a real gift. She has such a feeling for acting, situations, her partners and the camera, making her a true ally on the set.

### **The film presents a gallery of colorful characters. How did you create them?**

I wanted to film Tunisia and in particular the middle classes, the ones who are truly caught between modernity and tradition. The poorer classes are just trying to get by and the upper classes are for the most part westernized. The conflict I was interested in, and have some experience with, is the one faced by the indebted middle classes, who often live in a state of total hypocrisy with regard to sexuality and religion. The question of religion is treated in subtext in the film. It's a structural element in the





lives of my characters, but it is not at the centre of the story. This is a fiction film, not a documentary. I'm obviously starting from a foundation of realism, and my characters are hybrids of real and fictional people. I wanted to avoid simplistic sociology at all costs: the macho, authoritarian father; the poor, oppressed woman. I wanted to shake up the stereotypes with a young, open-minded imam, a mother who is a real guardian of the temple, a father obsessed by his daughter's success at school, an incorruptible cop, the character of Raouf who is confused about his gender despite his over-the-top Mediterranean machismo. The film is not dogmatic, I'm not pushing any particular message. I'm presenting some characters with their contradictions, their little weaknesses, their reasons, their courage, their morals. All the characters in my film are dealing with some form of melancholy, and the little breaks in the comedy are what make them complex, human and thus universal.

**The film ends on a note of hope and optimism for Selma and those around her. Does this reflect your own view of the country's evolution?**

The film has an open ending that does indeed lean towards hope and optimism. However, the characters' stories are still unfolding. They present infinite positive or negative possibilities. The country has been pursuing its transformation since the revolution. Some things have moved forward in a positive sense, others less so. But Tunisians are intelligent and keen to protect their freedom and their singularity in the Arab world. I can only imagine the best for the future.



## MANELE LABIDI

Born in 1982, Manele Labidi is a French-Tunisian writer/director. She studied politics and economics and worked in finance for a few years before deciding to become a filmmaker. She has been involved in different writing and directing projects for the theatre, radio and for TV series. Her first short film, A Room of my Own is a tragicomic variation around Virginia Woolf's essay. In 2016, she took part in a screenwriting program at la FEMIS in Paris. Arab Blues is her first feature film.

## FILMOGRAPHY

**2019 ARAB BLUES**

**2018 A ROOM OF MY OWN (Short film)**

## CAST

Golshifteh Farahani	Selma
Majd Mastoura	Naïm
Aïcha Ben Miled	Olfa
Feriel Chamari	Baya
Hichem Yacoubi	Raouf
Najoua Zouhair	Nour
Jamel Sassi	Fares
Ramla Ayari	Amel
Moncef Ajengui	Mourad
Zied Mekki	Amor (Policeman)
Oussama Kochkar	Chokri (Policeman)

## CREW

DIRECTOR	Manele Labidi
SCREENPLAY	Manele Labidi
CINEMATOGRAPHY	Laurent Brunet
EDITING	Yorgos Lamprinos
MUSIC	Flemming Nordkrog
SOUND	Olivier Dandré, Jerôme Gonthier, Rym Debbrarh-Mounir, Samuel Aïchoun
PRODUCTION DESIGN	Mila Preli, Raouf Helioui
COSTUMES	Hyat Luszpinski
PRODUCTION	Kazak Productions
PRODUCER	Jean-Christophe Reymond
ASSOCIATE PRODUCER	Amaury Ovisé
CO-PRODUCTION	Arte France Cinéma
IN COLLABORATION WITH	Diaphana, MK2 Films
WITH THE SUPPORT OF	Canal+, OCS, Arte France
IN ASSOCIATION WITH	Cinéventure 4, Cofimage 30, Cofinova 15
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