

MIZAR FILMS
PRESENTS



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Official Selection

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FOR MY COUNTRY

A FILM BY RACHID HAMI

2022 – FRANCE, TAIWAN – FRENCH, ARABIC, ENGLISH, MANDARIN – 113'

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FILMS

SYNOPSIS

Aissa, a young officer of Algerian origin, tragically loses his life during a fresher initiation ritual at the prestigious French military academy of Saint-Cyr. As the death tears through his family, controversy arises over Aissa's funeral plans when the Army refuses to take responsibility. Ismael, his older, rebellious brother, tries to keep the family united as they fight to win justice for Aissa.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

My brother would have done anything to prove he was worth something. Anything, but within limits, and not with just anyone. As an immigrant kid, uprooted from Algeria in 1991 at the age of 6 to flee the civil war and the Islamists, a Muslim refugee in the disadvantaged suburbs of Paris with all the "others", he rejected the traditional traps of the banlieue, or rather those caricatures we often still see presented on our screens today and by the media, by those looking to perpetuate old perceptions of the banlieue or for a quick headline. Nor would he be the Arab playing *Scarface*, driven by easy money and violent clashes with the cops. No way would he pit the Islamic faith against French secularism, and nor the comedy of victimization. My brother was hungry for grandeur, but above all for honour. His dream of integration and recognition would lead him to the prestigious Saint-Cyr military academy, the army's elite. If you want to be recognized for your worth, you must be prepared to die.

As his older brother, I felt the bitterness of being downgraded socially and the discouragement of an apparently merciless milieu. Especially when I saw my mother, a strong, independent and educated woman, suffocating under the burden of the clichés of the Arab woman in a headscarf, illiterate and submissive, to which television and the media have accustomed us. Arab, Muslim and socially disadvantaged, three reasons to inspire resentment rather than exaltation. When my brother realized his dream by entering Saint-Cyr in October 2012, at the age of 24, with an impeccable academic record, I felt that I had been wrong not to share his optimism. When, two weeks later, he drowned during a hazing rite organized by his fellow students, I told myself that I had been right all along not to believe in it.

Because my brother, born in Algeria, ready to die for France, and having done so earlier than expected, was not entitled to the right cemetery even after losing his life. They wanted to bury him in the Muslim plot of a suburban cemetery rather than in the military one. Dying was not enough. When you are nobody, you remain nobody until the very end.

However, the starting point of my film is that reality is impossible to present in black and white, the army was not the villain in this story, for it was divided too. While fighting for my brother to have the honours he believed in, I discovered an alliance that I had never imagined with the general director of Saint-Cyr, a practising Catholic, a man of honour, deeply wounded by the insult to my brother and ready to do anything to have his values recognized. Instead of a manichean view of the world, we try to offer a third option, where individuals are not confined by the fundamental reflexes of their group, where they are ready to venture to the other side of the world if necessary to assert themselves and believe that beyond social, political and religious categorization, there may be a chance of finding fulfilment and one's place in a world, that is sometimes harsh for those who dream.

The themes of my film are universal (integration, faith, family, the image of the disadvantaged suburbs and belonging to an increasingly global citizenry), but I also wanted to interrupt the cycle of films that just tell violent, depression or exotic stories about immigration and the banlieue and show this deeply personal and human story from the inside, an Arab Muslim family, yes - but French, too.

Rachid Hami

INTERVIEW WITH RACHID HAMY - DIRECTOR

FOR MY COUNTRY is based on a private and painful chapter in your family history. Why did you decide to make this film on such a personal subject now?

My brother's story is an uncommon one: Jallal, a young man born in Algeria, Muslim, living in the Paris *banlieue*, French and patriotic, who, after brilliant studies at Sciences-Po and TaiDa (Taiwan National University), joined the École Spéciale Militaire Saint-Cyr, where the actions of his fellow students led to his death. When the idea of making a film out of this story came to me in 2013, the universality of the themes that I was planning to tackle were clear: family, faith, honour, homeland, death, life, integration, the desire to belong to a country...

In 2010, to complete his Masters degree at Sciences-Po, Jallal went to learn traditional Mandarin at the prestigious TaiDa University. On a whim, I decided to join him in Taipei. It was a unique moment where we were able to confront our differences, far from everything and everyone. Since his death, this interlude has taken on a salutary, tender but also terribly political significance.

With nationalism gaining ground in France, it is vital to tell stories like Jallal's. It slams the door on many of the clichés that plague public debate. It is also important to interrupt the cycle of films that tell violent, depressing or exotic stories about immigration and the *banlieue*. I wanted to tell this true story from the inside, with the tool at my disposal: cinema.

From our very first conversations about the project, Nicolas Mauvernay, my producer, placed his trust in me and, from writing to editing, offered me exceptional support, for which I am infinitely grateful.

The award-winning screenplay of FOR MY COUNTRY was co-written with French philosopher and novelist Ollivier Pourriol. What were the main stakes in writing for you?

My producer, Nicolas Mauvernay, who is very involved in the writing process, introduced me to Ollivier Pourriol in 2018. We soon acquired genuine complicity and trust. Ollivier believes above all in fiction. We started from a true story, a real-life story, from the most intimate reality, in order to develop a screenplay that was as dramatic and surprising as possible.

We treated the struggle for Jallal's funeral as a contemporary version of the story of Antigone's fight to give her brother a proper burial. We placed our trust in this well-known tragedy and then brought in the Algerian origins and the unexpected adventure in Taiwan.

We strove to present a story that is faithful to the clichés of the genre while breaking with them and which, while starting from a private family tragedy, avoids complacency and resentment to move towards a form of melancholy devoid of illusions.

I would like to stress that Ollivier brought a great deal to the film, and that he has a rare talent: working with him makes you better at what you do.

This collective writing work, which took place over three years, was rewarded with the Grand Prix du Scénario 2020, awarded to *For My Country* from among more than 300 projects.

FOR MY COUNTRY is a family drama with a strong political dimension. How did you maintain the balance between these two important aspects of the screenplay?

I really try to avoid political commentary to focus as much as possible on cinema.

The political subtext is of course an integral part of the film and we had to find a way to relate it, a way to create cinema rather than a sterile pamphlet. That's why it was important for me to make a film where the political elements would pass through the personal prism, to show what this tragic event creates as consequences in a family that rejects the simplistic representations of which it has been a victim for 30 years.

Like many Muslims, and foreigners in the broadest sense of the term, the Saïdis celebrate Christmas and feel deeply French without ever denying their roots. They represent the success of integration and the rejection of assimilation. They are complex, nuanced, different from each other, and all refuse the victimization into which they could fall. In this sense, the film offers a modern and unusual image of the Arab family.

It was also important for me to show a fair representation of my mother, of the Arab woman. Far from the clichés of illiterate and submissive women with headscarves who have become repertoire characters in cinema and television, Nadia (Lubna Azabal) is a strong, independent, courageous, dignified and educated woman. She is sometimes cruel, sometimes tender... She is a character and not a simply functional figure.

I wanted a realistic and fair description of the army. That's why the character of General Caillard (Laurent Lafitte) is so important. He brings an essential nuance to the film. Like any institution, the army is made up of men and women, different from each other, some with questionable values like General Ledoux (Laurent Capelluto) or noble ones like General Caillard, who carries within him the ideals of honour, justice and dignity. I wanted us to see the man behind the uniform, and the link between personal faith and the public expression of duty.

The religion of others has always been a good reason to wage war on them. But when a faith is sincere, whatever religion it is rooted in, it can connect with the faith of others, moving mountains if necessary. I saw that with my own eyes, this link, this thread between a Catholic general and a young Muslim soldier, between a man who could have been his spiritual father, and my brother who was seeking a lineage. At a time when the expression "*Allahu Akbar*" is synonymous with terrorist demands for most non-Muslims, I wanted to play a different tune, whispered and intimate, that of sincere faith and an open spirituality, compatible with full citizenship.

The gestures of learned religion sometimes only make sense through a lengthy diversion and in unforeseeable circumstances: this is the case of Ismaël, who is overcome by religious emotion in Taipei, in a Taoist temple, surrounded by men and women praying to their gods. He, the foreigner, is overwhelmed by this feeling of spirituality and joins the collective movement by praying to Allah.

What was your goal in cinematic terms?

From the writing stage, my goal was to make a film that broke with the codes of social cinema. I wanted to make a film in motion, focused on the characters. It was absolutely necessary for my

camera to find the right distance, never to be too close or too far from the actors, to film shots that made sense without ever being arbitrary.

I have always admired the films of Akira Kurosawa, Edward Yang, Costa Gavras and Lee Chang-Dong. The characters are at the centre of their films. In preparation, we watched films from these directors again. By following their thinking and questions, I tried to find my own way, my directing style.

The shot breakdown was worked out beforehand. I had to be precise in order to organize the transition from one sequence to the next and to mix Algiers, Paris and Taipei naturally, with a constant rhythm. I alternated between sequence shots and more rapidly edited scenes, seeking an arrhythmia typical of impressionist cinema, so that the film makes sense at the end, when the audience realizes how far we've come from the forest of Saint-Cyr where Aïssa sings *Commandos d'Afrique* to the karaoke taxi where the two brothers sing the rap song *Pour Ceux*.

Because light has strong emotional power, we tried to create atmospheres that contribute to the scenes' narrative, to choose what to reveal or what to leave in the shadows... The light is never directly on the actors, but always against them, in order to give depth to their performance.

Very early on, we chose to shoot the Algiers and Taipei scenes with anamorphic lenses in order to have a rounder image; to detach the actors from the settings with more pronounced blurring and to have a softer colour palette. For the French part, we chose to shoot with spherical lenses, to obtain a more clinical, harsh and realistic image, with less blurring, in order to place the actors more in the settings, more in the present.

At every stage in the film's making, we always had the actors in mind. They were at the centre of the production process, from preparation to post-production. The film had to form a dense, precise and human block.

In your opinion, how does this story, which takes place between Algeria, France and Taiwan, have a universal resonance that can touch audiences around the world?

You are always someone else's foreigner. France and Algeria have a history and a past that cannot be overcome. It is very difficult to get out of the rut in which past and present conflicts have become entrenched. To loosen this stranglehold, the film takes the gamble of going to Taiwan and offering the two brothers a neutral space, a distance that allows them to put their conflicts, be they domestic or social, into perspective, placing them in a situation that is not only foreign, but also unfamiliar.

For My Country is an international coproduction between Mizar Films, France 2 (for the French side) and Ma Studio, TAICCA (for the Taiwanese side). In this story, French and Taiwanese alike found something human and universal.

In passing through Paris, Algiers and Taipei, the film explores the history of three peoples seeking to define their identity, the result of a history of colonization and decolonization that has still not been resolved.

You have worked with a prestigious cast. How did you cast the actors playing the roles in your life?

Actors are the heart of a film, they are the most important element in cinema. On the set of *For My Country*, I had the privilege and opportunity to work with some wonderful actors and actresses. It's rare to bring together so much talent in one film, with both established and non-professional actors.

The encounter of Karim Leklou with Ismaël gives birth to a disturbing character who has a form of rage in his eyes. But there is charming gentleness and melancholy too.

Shaïn Boumedine is a very emotional actor, who brings opacity, toughness and vulnerability to Aïssa, meaning that the character never becomes a hagiographic cliché.

Lubna Azabal has given Nadia strength and courage, but also a hint of guilt-inducing insincerity, along with a certain cruelty. She allows me to escape the cliché of the grieving mother and build up a much more complex character, one that is far from the standard view of the Arab and Muslim woman.

Vivian Sung gives the character of Julie brightness and lightness that brings more life to the film.

Laurent Laffite plays General Caillard with humanity and nobility. In a way, this character symbolizes Aïssa's dream and vision of the army.

However, the greatest challenge of the film was taken up by the children, Lyam and Nahyl, who played Aïssa and Ismaël as children with maturity, strength and intelligence. They were incredible.

All the actors and actresses brought a part of themselves to this film.

What do you hope that the audience will take away from this film?

This is not a film about my brother's death, it's a film about life being invented, dreaming and taking risks. That is why we still believe in the cinema, isn't it? He dreamed of being an officer, I dream of being a filmmaker, we never stop dreaming and waking up.

I hope that the audience will come away from the film feeling that they have woken up in a more vibrant and nuanced life and I hope that they will keep within them the conviction that we are always more than what our identities, groups, religious or nations tell us we are.

ABOUT RACHID HAMI - Director

Born in 1985, Rachid Hami fled the Algerian civil war with his mother and brothers to find a better future in France. In 2003, Rachid Hami met Abdellatif Kechiche and later Arnaud Desplechin who supported his ambition to become a filmmaker. Following his 2005 short film *No Effect Without Cause*, Rachid Hami made the medium-length film *Choosing Love* in 2007, a modern *Romeo and Juliet* starring Louis Garrel and Leïla Bekhti. In 2016, Rachid Hami directed his first feature film *Orchestra Class (La Mélodie)*, the story of Simon Daoud (Kad Merad), a distinguished and disillusioned violinist sent to teach the violin to a class of unruly students, which premiered in Venice.

FILMOGRAPHY

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| 2022 | FOR MY COUNTRY (POUR LA FRANCE) Feature, 123' |
| 2017 | ORCHESTRA CLASS (LA MÉLODIE) Feature, 102' |
| 2015 | THE REMINISCENCES (LES RÉMINISCENCES) Short |
| 2007 | CHOOSING LOVE (CHOISIR D'AIMER) Short, 49' |
| 2005 | NO EFFECT WITHOUT CAUSE (POINT D'EFFET SANS CAUSE) Short, 30' |

CAST

Ismaël

Aïssa

NadiaAdil

Adil

Général Caillard

Julie

Brahim

Hajar

Linda

Yacine

Karim LEKLOU

Shaïn BOUMEDINE

Lubna AZABAL

Samir GUESMI

Laurent LAFITTE

Vivian SUNG

Slimane DAZI

Souhade TEMIMI

Alicia HAVA

Elyes AGUIS

CREW

| | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Director | Rachid Hami |
| Screenplay | Rachid Hami, Ollivier Pourriol |
| Producer | Nicolas Mauvernay |
| Producer (Taiwan) | Amy Ma |
| Executive Producer (Taiwan) | Tien-Tsung Ma |
| Director of Photography | Jérôme Almeras |
| Editor | Joëlle Hache |
| Production Designer | Yann Megard |
| Costume Designer | Joana Georges Rossi |
| Makeup Design | Diane Jaurey |
| Music | Dan Levy |
| Sound | Mathieu Descamps |
| Re-recording Mixer | Éric Tisserand |
| Casting | Elsa Pharaon |
| Production Manager | Guillaume Parent |
| Set Photographer | Christophe Brachet |
| Production | Mizar Films |
| French Distribution | Memento Distribution |
| International sales | mk2 Films |

INTERNATIONAL PRESS & SALES

INTERNATIONAL PRESS
Christelle Randall PR
Christelle Randall
Christelle@christellerandall.com
+44 7834 624 300



INTERNATIONAL SALES
Fionnuala Jamison, Managing Director
fionnuala.jamison@mk2.com

Olivier Barbier, Head of Acquisitions
olivier.barbier@mk2.com

Quentin Bohanna, International Sales
quentin.bohanna@mk2.com

Elise Cochin, International Sales
elise.cochin@mk2.com

Anne-Laure Barbarit, Festival Manager
anne-laure.barbarit@mk2.com

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