

KAZAK PRODUCTIONS

PRESENTS



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CANNES 2022

# SONS OF RAMSES

A FILM BY CLÉMENT COGITORE

2022 – FRANCE – DRAMA – FRENCH, ARABIC – 98'

**mk2**  
FILMS

## SYNOPSIS

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Ramses is a skillful clairvoyant in the multicultural Parisian district of La Goutte d'Or. When a gang of fearless kids start terrorizing the locals, the balance of his thriving business and of the whole neighborhood is disturbed. Until one day, when Ramses has a real vision.

## INTERVIEW WITH CLÉMENT COGITORE

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### **How did *Sons of Ramses* get started?**

First of all, I wanted to move away from filming vast expanses, like in *The Wakhan Front* and *Braguino*, and focus on an urban setting, like the one right outside my home. For years I lived in the Barbès / Goutte d'Or district in northern Paris. The film draws on my experience and fondness for the neighborhood and the way it became part of my life. We shot from Barbès all the way up to the Plaine Saint-Denis, along the axis passing through the Porte de la Chapelle, where you see a rather monstrous movement of the city driving out the popular and middle classes like a steam roller. With construction sites and rear courtyards on the margins. For me, a film consists first and foremost of tuning into a place in the world and asking what kind of energy we get from it at that moment. During the shoot, I had the strong feeling I was saying something about the city that belongs only to the present.

### **And why did you decide to set *Sons of Ramses* in the milieu of marabout “seers”?**

Because they're a feature of the neighborhood that really interests me: what is these mediums' consolatory story with its rules and scams, which at the same time addresses people's real pain?

Exploring this realm was also a way for me to examine what's at work in my own art, which also stems from story-telling and questions the need to tell stories, as well as how this need is linked to death and disappearance, or at any rate, unaccepted and unresolved mysteries.

### **You never look down on or poke fun at Ramses' actions. The second scene in his consulting room is filmed quite similarly to the first, despite what we've learned. The energy remains the same, you don't condemn Ramses' scamming.**

My aim wasn't to show a manipulator or scammer, but rather to make it hard to judge. Morally speaking, our only choice is to condemn Ramses, but his fictions are as consoling and healing as they are harmful. We feel he himself doesn't fully grasp the extent and complexity of what he does. In the consulting room, he seems shamanistic and at the same time almost perverse, he plays on the register of both empathy and scam.

I try never to judge my characters, even more so when it comes to this precarious, marginalized community. The world of the Goutte d'Or mediums and psychics is a small-scale exploitation of poverty and misfortune by people who are in the same boat themselves. A couple of them do well, but mainly it's an economy of survival. I didn't want to look down on them, just take them as they are and explore how they operate.

### **Did you research the world of mediums?**

I did a lot of research into mediums but I was often disappointed because in general they're pretty mediocre! Their stratagems are so blatant that it's hard to draw inspiration from them or be interested in the people using them. Actually, a writer and director's best friends are imagination and common sense, much more so than research which can be limiting and restraining.

So I asked myself: if I were to scam someone today, how would I go about it? Especially with the internet and social media. Which joins an area of reflection I'm very interested in: the question of digital identity, the character we create on social media. All Ramses has to do is

delve into this fiction and feed it back to his client from a different perspective. And suddenly the person sees it as a story, when in fact they wrote it themselves on their wall!

Ramses seems to be extemporizing, but behind his so-called brilliant intuition, he uses a specific psychological channel to reach people, and technical tools to provide the information he offers at just the right moment to gain his client's trust. Then he seizes the opportunity to manipulate them even further, making generalizations sound like valuable information that concerns them alone. With this film, I realized I need my characters to do their jobs very well in order to write and subsequently film them. No doubt because they do what they do with intensity and a strong sense of commitment.

**How did you come up with the idea for Ramses' collective sessions? What he does is quite surprising, yet avoids falling into melodrama.**

There too I speculated based on the knowledge I had of the milieu and his character. From the beginning, I didn't want an evangelist shouting and waving his arms about on a big stage. An American film would have played it that way, but European – and especially French – culture has a different emotional relationship when it comes to a group. In these sessions, there's almost an element of group therapy but it remains in the private sphere and adds an aura to what Ramses establishes one-on-one. There is something of the illusionist about him, but without intimidating or frightening people. Even more so since Ramses holds these sessions in a neighborhood center. In districts like the Goutte d'Or, there's always a very local relationship to things.

**Ramses' father has a much more decisive relationship with faith than his son.**

We sense that Ramses grew up with a deficient father with a borderline excessive relationship to faith. If I had to describe Ramses' childhood, I imagine a rather rational and clever kid who wondered how he could cash in on a world ruled by such irrational beliefs. And he developed a little system that benefits enormously from these beliefs, but from a pragmatic and capitalistic point of view. Hence the meeting with the other mediums who reproach his lure of money.

**The film doesn't explore religion, but a more primal desire for belief.**

I did in fact want to get away from religion and focus on pure belief, the voice of the dead and the economy of the voice of the dead, because this is actually how Ramses earns more money: unlike the majority of North African seers and mediums, he doesn't address only Muslims, he's not only on the market of Moroccan superstition. The fact he doesn't fall back on religion means people from any background can come to him. His universal way of considering the dead without passing through a religious or cultural door lets him capture more of the market.

**And your desire to recount the violence of the gang of boys from Tangier?**

They weren't in the script at first. They were inspired by reality, when groups of children from Tangier began appearing in the Goutte d'Or neighborhood around 2016. You'd see them hanging around and, like in the film, they'd sometimes climb scaffolding to break into homes. At one point, they terrorized the neighborhood, no one knew what to do with them. Even the dealers were up in arms since they were so unruly, they disturbed the local drug traffic.

When I heard all the horrible things about them, I knew I'd found the antagonistic element that could destabilize Ramses: the inconsolable faced with the great consoler.

**The construction site plays a central role in the film.**

When I started writing, the major construction zones were located mainly at Porte de Clichy. But when we were preparing to shoot, they had shifted to Porte de la Chapelle, where a university was being built plus a new tramway – the Grand Paris Express – in preparation for the Olympics. Exactly where I wrote it into the script.

The construction site tells a powerful story, with the façade of brand new buildings that protect the castle of Paris like a wall. And before it, all the rubble, the ring road and the rest of the world.

**The construction site is also symbolic as it tips Ramses into a different relationship with the world. He suddenly acts like a dog tracking a scent.**

Yes, all of a sudden intuition kicks in and he gets sucked into it. I like the fact some mysteries are solved, like Ramses' "magic," and others aren't, notably how and why he finds the body in the construction site.

The first part of the film is rather introductory; we go from place to place by deduction, we follow Ramses in his work and interactions with his clients. The violence of the street is his terrain and he reacts pragmatically, we understand his logic. We have a character who asks the right questions and, in theory, finds the right answers. But when the body appears, his mercantile relation to the world spirals out of control, Ramses flounders in a swamp that is not as rational and controllable as he'd thought, and he loses the relation between cause and effect. The scenes ricochet along, the transitions are less logical and we enter a realm of pure sensation. I wanted the heart of the film to be this core where intuition and the unconscious are at work and overturn the smoke and mirrors.

The film is more of an urban, mystical thriller in the sense that it's the story of a mystery. But not an otherworldly or contemplative story. For me, the mystical is not a view of the spirit, it has to do with matter. When Ramses lays the body down then shows it to the children, he does so with extreme care, the body is heavy, each of his movements is a moment of vibrations that I try to seize in a sort of illusionary naturalism. Everything is extremely real and physical, yet it could also just as well be one big hallucination.

***Sons of Ramses* has both the urgency of a film shot with a handheld camera and a highly composed, pictorial feeling.**

That comes from the extreme synergy between my DOP Sylvain Vernet and myself. One of us is always trying to create order, and the other, chaos! We establish the dramaturgy of the shot and as soon as that's done, we immediately seek to disrupt it, essentially through Sylvain's intuition and gift for composition.

In *Sons of Ramses*, I was fascinated by how Sylvain and Karim Leklou – based on the map of movements I'd give them, the scale of shots I wanted and what we'd discussed about the role – would suddenly make something true and accurate happen in the shot. That's the most beautiful thing in cinema: setting out the rules of the game then letting the actors take possession of them. Karim moves like a sort of a marvelous creature: the quickness of his actions, the way he sweeps the children along with him... He really sets the pace in the longer shots.

**Karim Leklou brings an ambiguity to the character that forces us to constantly reevaluate our opinion of him.**

Karim has a rare and priceless gift for getting at the details of the voice, gesture and gaze. The range of his acting is very broad. He can be violent and loud one instant and equally charming and gentle the next. The modulations of his voice and facial expressions are highly varied and intense. He can just as easily evoke a local hoodlum as the son of a good family or one of Rublev's Christs with his chinstrap beard. He brings complexity to Ramses, a powerful empathy and unique circulation of emotion.

**The rest of the cast consists primarily of unknown and non-professional actors.**

I love filming faces that are never, or only rarely, filmed, and confronting professionals with non-professionals, since their different energies are so mutually enriching.

The children had to speak very good Darija (Moroccan Arabic). We needed to believe they had lived in the streets of Tangier and had crossed Europe, not that they were kids from the suburbs hanging around the neighborhood. Most of them are newcomers who answered the casting call organized by Mohamed Belhamar. Above all, we needed to take them for who they were, to sense where they were at ease and where we could depend on them. Then guide their acting. Instead of having them read the script, we explained the situation and gave them a few words to say.

**Tatiana Vialle, your casting director, is also credited with directing the actors. How do you work together ?**

Luckily, she was already there on *The Wakhan Front* where the shoot was so chaotic I barely had time to talk to the actors! For *Sons of Ramses*, I had a lot more confidence, but I still feel young in terms of directing actors, and Tatiana helps me listen to them, hear them and take care of them. And she gives me a second opinion on the acting, how far we can take them, how to work with non-professionals.

With *Sons of Ramses*, I wanted to make a more scripted film with more written characters. I spent a lot of time on the screenplay, each word that arrived on set was thought out and I took great pleasure in working with the actors, rehearsing with them, rewriting lines together. I kind of feel like I began directing actors on this film.

**The film's name in French refers to the Paris neighborhood but also has a metaphorical dimension...**

I wasn't aiming to depict the Goutte d'Or neighborhood as such but to look at it through a small prism and make it a setting for a coming-of-age tale, with the closing words that operate as a sort of baptism: "Goutte d'Or [Gold Drop], that is your name." I was striving for a highly contemporary and urban aspect with an alchemical filter.

*Interview by Claire Vassé*

## ABOUT CLÉMENT COGITORE

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After studying at Le Fresnoy, Clément Cogitore developed his artistic practice between Cinema and Contemporary Art. In 2015, his first feature film, *The Wakhan Front*, was selected for the Critic's Week at the Cannes Film Festival. It was awarded by the Gan Foundation and nominated for the "Best First Film" at the Césars. His 2017 documentary *Braguino* won the Zabatelgi prize at the San Sebastian Film Festival and was nominated at the Césars.

### FILMOGRAPHY

<b>2022</b>	<b>SONS OF RAMSES (Goutte d'Or)</b>   Feature, 98'
<b>2017</b>	<b>LES INDES GALANTES</b>   Short, 5'
<b>2017</b>	<b>BRAGUINO</b>   Short, 48'
<b>2015</b>	<b>THE WAKHAN FRONT (Ni le Ciel ni la Terre)</b>   Feature, 102'
<b>2011</b>	<b>BIELUTIN (Bielutine)</b>   Short, 35'
<b>2011</b>	<b>AMONG US (Parmi nous)</b>   Short, 29'

## CAST

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Ramsès	Karim Leklou
Mickael	Malik Zidi
Younes	Ahmed Benaïssa
Céleste	Elsa Wolliaston
Hachara	Jawad Outouia
Farel	Elyes Dkhissi
Grace	Yilin Yang
Mère de Frikket et Farel	Loubna Abidar



## CREW

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Screenplay	Clément Cogitore
Director	Clément Cogitore
Production	Kazak Productions
Producer	Jean-Christophe Reymond
Associate Producer	Amaury Ovisé
Casting	Tatiana Nuytten Vialle Mohamed Belhamar
Photography	Sylvain Verdet
Editing	Isabelle Manquillet
Sound	Jean Collot
Production design	Chloé Cambournac
Costumes	Isabelle Pannetier
Makeup	Aurélie Rameau
Hair	Jean-Marc Benois
Assistant director	Olivia Delplace
Production manager	Thomas Paturel
Post-production manager	Pauline Gilbert
Sound editing	Olivier Voisin
Mixing	Vincent Cosson
International sales	mk2 Films
French Distribution	DIAPHANA

### Les Prix du Scénario

A screenplay by Clément Cogitore  
Winner of the Grand Prix des Prix du Scénario 2021  
Organized by Hildegarde

With the support of CNC, Fondation d'entreprise David Hadida and France Culture



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