

a film by Halima Ouardiri

MOKHTAR



tiff. toronto
international
film festival
OFFICIAL SELECTION 2010

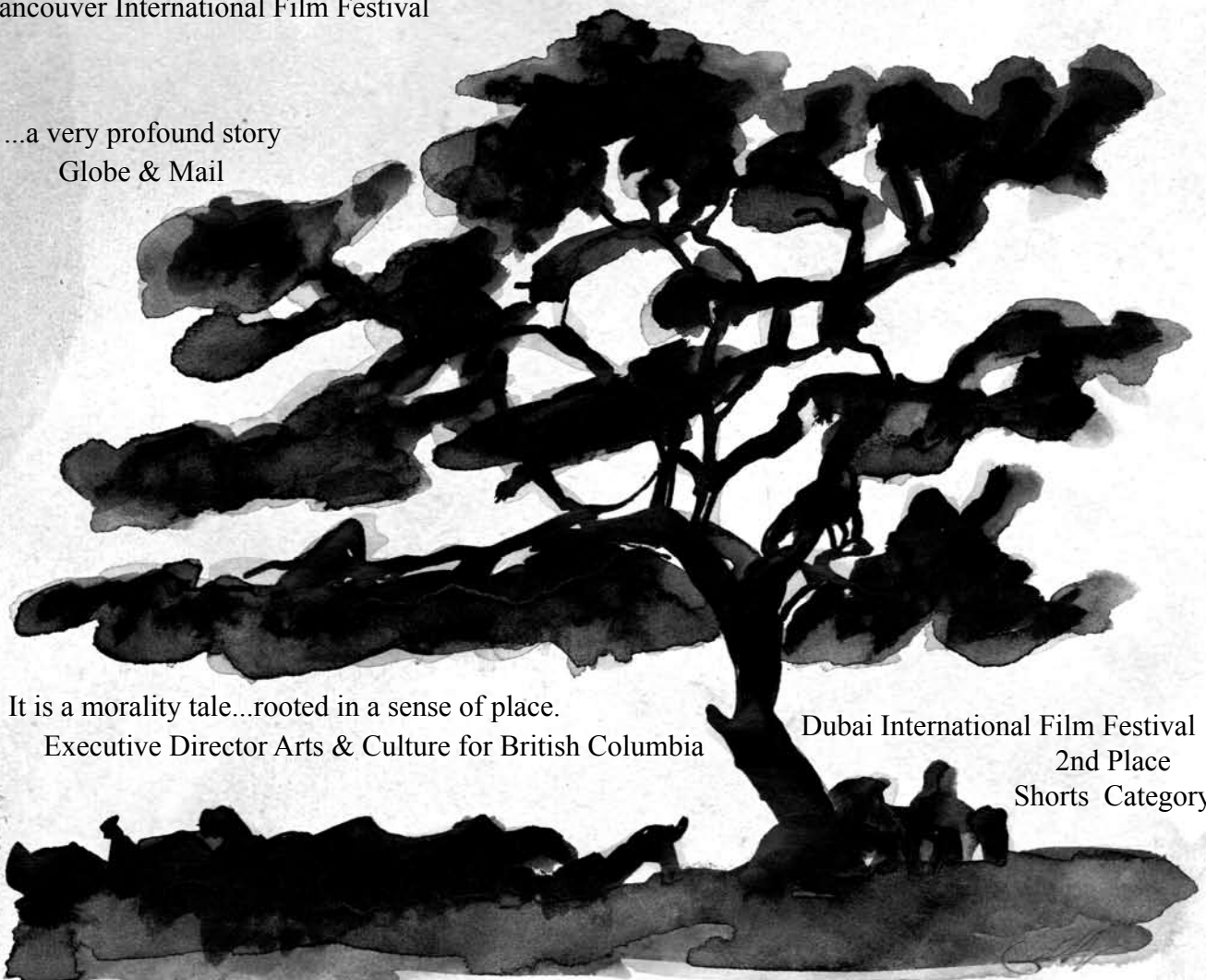


Vancouver Observer

...an awesome...Canadian film based in Morocco

Most Promising Director
Vancouver International Film Festival

...a very profound story
Globe & Mail



It is a morality tale...rooted in a sense of place.

Executive Director Arts & Culture for British Columbia

Dubai International Film Festival

2nd Place

Shorts Category

EyeSteelFilm presents "MOKHTAR" Featuring ABDALLAH ICHIKI, S'FIA MOUSSA & OMAR BELARBI, Editor HÉLÈNE GIRARD,
Cinematography DURAÏD MUNAJIM, Sound Design BRUNO PUCELLA, Production Design BRAHIM BATTÀ,
Original Music by RADWAN MOUMNEH Associate Producer BOB MOORE, Executive Producer DANIEL CROSS,
Produced by HALIMA OUARDIRI & MILA AUNG-THWIN, Written and Directed by HALIMA OUARDIRI

INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

SODEC
Québec

Conseil des arts
et des lettres
Québec



Conseil des Arts
du Canada

Canada Council
for the Arts

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CINEMA
FESTIVAL



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مهرجان القاهرة
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القلم



Québec
Film Festival

Canada

MOKHTAR

written & directed by Halima Ouardiri

Synopsis

Written by Halima Ouardiri, and based on a true story, *Mokhtar* recounts the tale of a young boy who lives with his family of goatherds in a remote, Moroccan village. One day, the boy finds a fallen owl and decides to keep it, despite the fact that the owl is considered a bad omen. Mokhtar's new pet becomes a symbol of rebellion against his family and an icon of his fledgling independence. Kinship, religion and spirituality are all confronted in this film that celebrates inner and outer strength.

Director Bio

Born in Switzerland to a Swiss mother and Algerian-Moroccan father, Halima Ouardiri, as a young girl grew up with spirited curiosity and engaged in a diversity of pursuits from training horses and later working as a bodyguard for visiting princesses in Geneva, home of the United Nations. She relocated to Montreal, Canada to study political science and film production at Concordia University.

After her studies, she decided to remain in Canada and later hooked up with EyeSteelFilm, a Montreal-based documentary film and interactive media company dedicated to using cinema as a catalyst for social and political change. Halima picked up her first film credits working with indie films: as a guerrilla event co-ordinator on the critically acclaimed *Rip! A Remix Manifesto*, chief political strategist on *Punk the Vote*, and grassroots theatrical distributor on *Up the Yangtze*--that was well received at the Sundance Film Festival. More recently she's worked on films such as *Last Train Home*, which had great success at Sundance as well and was honored with 7 Cinema Eye nominations. Halima was also a producer on *Les Tickets* - set for a 2011 release. *Mokhtar* is her directorial debut.

Halima's journey to develop and create *Mokhtar* began with a scriptwriting contest she entered a few years ago. Winning the award for this coming-of-age story about a little boy, enabled her to move her film into production.

She assembled her crew from Canada and around the world and set off for Morocco to cast and shoot her film. Halima opted to use untrained actors in this film to lend it a greater air of authenticity—only the owl had professional training. *Mokhtar* was filmed in the countryside near Agadir, located in the southwest corner of the country near the Atlas mountains, and the cast were drawn from the outlying areas. Halima is currently in the process of writing her first feature film.

About EyeSteelFilm

EyeSteelFilm, founded by veteran documentary filmmakers Daniel Cross and Mila Aung-Thwin, is dedicated to using cinema as a catalyst for social and political change. EyeSteelFilm aims to develop and create cinema that empowers people ignored by mainstream media. More information about the company is located at www.eyesteelfilm.com Over the years, EyeSteelFilm has collaborated with a wide range of partners including: *The National Film Board of Canada*, *CBC*, *CTV*, *BBC*, *ZDF/ARTE*, *PBS* and *ITVS*.

PRESS CONTACT

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MOKHTAR

AWARDS LIST

Cinema Jove International Film Festival
Special Jury Award
Valencia, Spain
June 2011

Yorkton Film Festival
Best Multicultural Golden Sheaf Award
Best Emerging Filmmaker Award
Yorkton, Canada
May 2011

CurtoCircuito Film Festival
Prix TV Premio RTP Curta Onda
Santiago de Compostella, Spain
May 2011

Panaroma des cinemas du Maghreb
Prix du jury des jeunes lycéens
Saint-Denis, Paris
May 2011

Festival International du Cinéma
Méditerranéen de Tétouan
Grand Prize of the City of Tétouan
Tétouan, Morocco
March 2011

Festival REGARD sur le court métrage au
Saguenay
National Grand Prize
Chicoutimi, Canada
March 2011

Rendez-Vous du Cinéma Québécois
Prix Simplex – Best Short Fiction Film
Montreal, Canada
February 2011

Prends ça court Awards:
Spirafilm for Best Short Award
Films Séville Award, theatrical
distribution in front of a feature
Air Canada Award, license on Air Canada
UDA Award for Best Actor to Abdellah
Ichiki
Quebec, Canada
February 2011

Toronto International Festival Festival
Canada TIFF Top Ten
Toronto, Canada
January 2011

Dubai International Film Festival
Muhr Arab Short Award
Dubai, United Arab Emirates
December 2010

Prends ça court
Quebec Gold 2010
Montreal, Canada
December 2010

Cinéma Tous Ecrans
Prix TSR for Best International Short Film
Geneva, Switzerland
November 2010

Vancouver International Film Festival
Most Promising Director Award
Vancouver, Canada
October 2010

INTERVIEW WITH HALIMA OUARDIRI

Q: What inspired you to make the film?

A: The film is based on a true story that I heard from a handy man who works in Casablanca named Mokhtar who was scolded as a child for bringing home a pet owl. My vision was about putting faith in what you don't see, like jinns - supernatural creatures in Arab folklore and popular beliefs, superstitions and their consequences on society. They have always been a mystery to me, and the film gives justice to these lingering beliefs in my life. When I was a child, I was puzzled by the idea of believing in superstitions and old fears. Even though I grew up in a western country, I was warned about bad spirits and black magic. My father used to tell me that if I ignored them, they would manifest themselves in me, so he taught me prayers to keep them away. I guess it comes as no surprise that I'm still unsure whether I can ignore bad spirits and curses. I tried to make my way through these beliefs by making this film.

Absurdly harsh disciplining towards children is also something that has stuck with me since my own childhood, so it became important for me to capture a child's point of view - to show the essence of a young person, victim to traditional beliefs.

Q: How would you describe the style of your film and the influences behind it?

A: I see Mokhtar as a documentary inside a fantastic tale. When conceiving this film, my research and approach were based on uncovering truthful details. A script was written, but the shoots were loosely directed, scene by scene, and were not filmed in a chronological sequence. Mokhtar's story was, in fact, first described to the cast and I encouraged them to participate creatively in including their everyday life habits in the story. In using non-professional actors, I sought to capture a human perception of reality deeply rooted in a social environment in the hopes that the real life experiences of the villagers would inspire and lend the film an authenticity as well as a documentary feel. The cast come from areas where people believe in superstitions and so they understood the idea of bad spirits. To some extent, I don't consider them actors, but more so contributors to the creative input.

Q: What were some of the challenges you faced on set?

A: The scenes with the animals were not that difficult to do. We hired a local shepherd and his 40 goats to do the scenes. Goats naturally climb on Argan trees in Morocco. The tree I chose for the film was not a **goat-friendly tree**. We had to make a human circle around the tree with the goats inside and wait patiently so that the animals would, one after the other, climb on the tree and reach the top branches to eat the young leaves. It was a quiet and magic moment. And it's when we were busy with the prep of another scene that all the goats were on the tree like I had intended, so we immediately rushed back to shoot that scene which now appears in the opening scene of the film.

Q: How did you choose the setting for your film?

A: I went back to the roots of the story with the Amazighs (pronounced Amazirs). I was interested in capturing Berber culture in the regions of Morocco where goats climb trees.

I narrowed down the area, by doing a search in spirals by van. When I came across a house in Imsouane, everything came together and seemed to revolve around this house's charm.

Q: Why are owls considered a bad omen in Morocco? Is there a story behind the owls in the film?

A: Owls are regarded as an evil eye. It is known that you find them in the souks-- Moroccan markets in cages, alive. Their claws, beaks, and dried skin can also be sold there and used for black magic. I also heard that people think they are taking an infant's life away when an owl is seen flying over a house. *If you see an owl in the morning, go back to bed* – so the saying goes. The owls initially intimidated the cast, but quickly they were left mesmerized by their beauty.

Q: Were any animals harmed in production?

A: The owls are fine! No owls were harmed in the making of this film - in fact we worked with a specialized raptor wrangler from France who breeds them. We didn't want to work with wild owls to not encourage black market so we worked with trained captive birds. The baby owl was born handicapped that's why you see his leg on the side.

We bought a goat from the butcher. After the scene, the crew ate everything for 3 days, even the goat-head! It was burned and prepared traditionally. We also used the skin that we tried up to use inside the house as a carpet.

Q: Have you remained in touch with the actors in the film?

A: Abdallah and S'fia, his real-life grandmother, live in Imsouane in a house with no electricity, the same we used in the film. Actually today, they should have electricity since the crew helped them bring it to the house after we left. Prior to leaving Morocco I gave S'fia my production cell phone and my SIM card so I could phone them once in a while. The network is pretty spotty in the mountainous area where they live, and they can't afford to refill the phone very often so the SIM card is now expired. I have asked the crew members from Agadir to drop by their house from time-to-time to say hello for me when they are nearby. And I intend to go back in October to organize a screening of the film in the village open to everyone. I can't wait to go back to spend some time with them, especially S'fia and Abdallah that I love very much.

Q: Can you tell us about the challenges of being a female director?

A: I consider filmmaking as a challenge in itself for men and women. I look at myself as a person who had to make this film no matter what. I'm sure that some of the challenges in making this film came from the fact that I'm a woman but I did not pay attention--or get consumed by this. I was only focused on moving forward as a filmmaker--not devoting an excessive amount of attention to my gender. Maybe my next film will teach me something different about being a female director.

About the Cast

In using non professional actors, director Halima Ouardiri sought to capture a human perception of reality deeply rooted in a social environment in the hopes that the real life experiences of the villagers would inspire and lend the film an authenticity as well as a documentary feel.

“The characters were cast using local villagers—native to the rural region of Hahâ, Morocco,” states Halima. “The cast come from areas where people believe in superstitions and so they understood the idea of bad spirits. To some extent, I don’t consider them actors, but more so contributors to the creative input.”

Abdellah Ichiki – Mokhtar 9-year-old Abdallah is the eldest of his siblings and comes from a farming family. He lives in the vicinity of where the film was shot and S’fia, who plays his grandmother in the film is actually his real grandmother. One day after a long search, I noticed Abdallah acting out scenes with his friends out in the fields, and selected him to play main character Mokhtar, due to his charm, enthusiasm and strong desire to act.

S’fia Moussa – Mokhtar’s Grandmother Widowed at only 52-years-old, S’fia raised twelve children, six of whom are deceased. Prior to Mokhtar being filmed in her house, she had been living without electricity. S’fia closely related to her role in this film - especially towards the sometimes stern dynamic between the father and the children. She remembers her husband reprimanding his children by depriving them of food and shelter when goats went missing. On this film, she received equal pay as the male actors, which she found a pleasant surprise.

Omar Belarbi – Mokhtar’s Father Omar, 39, a fish vendor comes from the region. He’s married and he and his wife have two children. Omar was spotted by the crew while he was in a local market hurrying to stock up on ice to preserve his fish. Flattered that he was offered the role, Omar considered this twist of fate to be a fateful cal-ling. At times he was a challenge on set, as he was unaccustomed to female authority and earning equal pay.

Production Details & Credits

RUNNING TIME

16 minutes

YEAR OF RELEASE

2010

WORLD PREMIERE

2010 Toronto International Film Festival

FESTIVALS

Berlin International Film Festival/Berlinale - Dubai International Film Festival - Vancouver International Film Festival - International Rotterdam Film Festival – Québec Gold 2010 - Vancouver International Film Festival - Festival du Nouveau Cinema, Montreal - Cinéma Tous Ecrans - International Short Film Festival Winterthur - Canada TIFF Top Ten - Rendez-Vous du Cinéma Québécois - Glasgow Short Film Festival - Hong Kong International Film Festival - Festival International du Cinéma Méditerranéen de Tétouan – Rencontres cinématographiques de Béjaïa – FIDMarseille - Festival REGARD sur le court métrage au Saguenay - International Film Festival Breda - SXSW 2011

LANGUAGES

Tachelhit, original version with subtitles in French & English

STARRING

Abdellah Ichiki, Omar Belarbi, S'fia Moussa DIRECTED & WRITTEN BY Halima Ouardiri

PRODUCERS

Halima Ouardiri & Mila Aung-Thwin

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

Daniel Cross

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Duraïd Munajim

EDITOR

Hélène Girard

SOUND DESIGNER

Bruno Pucella

SCREENING FORMATS

35 mm, HDCam, DigiBeta, DVD