



# AS I OPEN MY EYES

**A film by Leyla Bouzid**

Official Selection, 2016 Tribeca Film Festival

Official Selection, 2015 Toronto International Film Festival

Official Selection, 2015 Venice Film Festival

2015 / France/Tunisia/Belgium/U.A.E. / 102 min. / Color / In Arabic with English subtitles

**Press materials: [www.kinolorber.com](http://www.kinolorber.com)**

**Distributor Contact**

Kino Lorber

333 W. 39<sup>th</sup> Street

New York, NY 10018

**Publicist Contact**

Emma Griffiths

[emma@eg-pr.com](mailto:emma@eg-pr.com)

(917) 806-0599

**Synopsis:**

*As I Open My Eyes* gives us a look at Tunisian youth on the eve of the Jasmine Revolution as they are pulled in all directions by conflicting forces: disenchantment, fear, creativity, rebellion against dictatorship, rejection of conservatism, and the courage to pursue their desires.

Farah (Baya Medhaffar) is a young woman at a crossroads. Her medical-school application has just been accepted, and nothing could please her mother, Hayet (Ghalia Benali), more — but Farah's passion is for music, and her underground band is just beginning to get noticed. Their music blends rock with daring lyrics that have the raw poetry of spoken word. Soon enough, the police are alerted to the band's subversive performances and begin to harass them, and when Farah is detained and interrogated, she realizes that one of her friends is a snitch.

The story was inspired by director Leyla Bouzid's personal experience: during Ben Ali's dictatorship, she and her friends ran a cine-club, one of whose members was discovered to be a secret-police informant.

Bouzid's behind-the-camera talent is complemented by Iraqi musician Khyam Allami's compositions and Ghassen Amami's hard-hitting lyrics, and by the engaging, truthful performances of the cast — particularly Medhaffar, a joy to watch on stage as the fiery Farah, sharing a marvelous onscreen chemistry with celebrated singer-performer Benali.

Synopsis courtesy of the Toronto International Film Festival

## **Interview with Director Leyla Bouzid:**

**The film takes place when Ben Ali was President, but was written and shot a long time after he fled the country. How has your work changed in relation to the historical and key events that have recently occurred in Tunisia?**

When the revolution happened, the desire was very strong to film and represent it. Many documentaries were shot then, all full of hope, all focused on the future. I, too, really wanted to film. Not the revolution, but what everyone had lived through and been subjected to: the suffocating everyday life, the total power of the police, the surveillance, the fear and paranoia of the Tunisian people over the past 23 years.

The revolution (or revolts, points of view are divergent) surprised the entire world, but it didn't come from nowhere. We couldn't just all of a sudden sweep away decades of dictatorship and turn towards the future without examining the past. For me it was obvious that we had to quickly review the past while the tide of freedom continued to flow.

Like most Tunisians, my euphoria was strong at first, followed by successive phases of enchantment and disenchantment. For the film, I didn't want the range of emotions linked to ongoing events to influence me. My only guide was trying to consistently follow the emotional journey traveled by the characters during the historical period being told. The goal was to be as accurate as possible in a work of fiction anchored in a specific historical context.

**Were you aware of the renewed restrictions on freedom during the shoot? Were you afraid of seeing the Ben Ali era come back to life in the eye of your camera?**

I was above all aware that I had to shoot the film quickly, while there was still time, and that it was important to film the fear the Tunisians felt when Ben Ali was in power. To memorize the difficulties of those years that we never wanted to see again, to conjure away the risk of seeing them come racing back.

During the shoot I noticed that many had already forgotten what it was like to live under Ben Ali. When I told the extras: "here there's a heavy silence" because under Ben Ali one couldn't hear such things without being afraid, some of them had a hard time trying to recompose the feeling. People had lost the reflexes they had had during that period, along with the memory of the fear and paranoia. From a certain standpoint, forgetting is not necessarily a bad thing. As if that period was really behind us. But amnesia and forgetting must be fought. That's one of the roles of cinema.

**You speak of fears in relation to the police system, but there is also a real terrorist threat looming over Tunisia. And yet religion is completely absent from the film.**

We're with young people who bubble over with energy, who do things, who want to make music, organize concerts, live their art. Religion is not in the center of their lives.

It's this energetic and creative youth who I wanted to film. Youth who fight everyday for their existence and who we rarely hear anything about. The only young people given a voice in the media are those who turn to extremism and violence. It seemed important to me to say that there are also young people who are driven by life, to give them a voice via Farah, show that she is muzzled by a terror that emanates from the system. Terrorism is not the only form of terror.

**Farah is trying to exist as an individual, to have her voice heard. We know “The Tunisian people”, the “We”, the “Nation”... But what place is given to “I”? At what price does one exist as a free individual in Tunisia? Did you have to pay that price? What is there of you in Farah?**

The film asks this question: how can one, in Tunisia, break free from family, from society, from the system? -- the energy that this requires, the resistance that it provokes and the violence that it can generate are tremendous. We follow the trajectory of Farah, who wants to live life to the fullest, who is fully alive, against all odds and everyone, and for that she is punished, crushed.

I think that in Tunisia, we all pay a price, whether one is an artist or not, at one time or another in one's life, at an intimate, familial, social or educational level. In Tunisian society, either one makes concessions, or one is confronted with countless obstacles. The story of the film is not autobiographical, even if there are a few situations that I myself lived through: that of discovering that a close friend, who belonged to the same cinema club as I, was a police informer. Someone who was there to watch us, to infiltrate us. That was a terrible shock; I realized then to what extent we were encircled and that we couldn't trust anything or anyone.

But Farah is very different from me. She is more impulsive and spontaneous than I am, I would never have been capable of going as far as she does. She is graced by a kind of innocence and courage, she hasn't integrated the limits that block any initiative; she's like a free electron.

**You chose the singer Ghalia Ben Ali to play the role of the mother, and gave Baya Medhaffar her first role, that of the heroine. How did the two actresses react to this choice?**

Ghalia was very surprised that I contacted her to play the part of a singer's mother. At first she was almost offended. But finally when she read the script, she was very enthusiastic. In the character of Hayet she saw things that reminded her of her own mother, and was excited to play the role. Ghalia's presence brought a lot to the film: she was a great help to Baya. They bonded beautifully together and developed a rhythm of their own. The last scene in the film is in fact inspired by the first meeting of the two actresses. Ghalia sang to encourage Baya to sing in her presence. Little by little, Baya started singing with Ghalia. This touched Ghalia so that tears started running down her cheeks while she smiled. It was very intense and suddenly, it was obvious that this was the end of the film.

To play the part of Farah, I needed a young girl of 18, very free, ready and able to embody the role, which required both singing and playing. It's a tough part for a novice. The casting lasted over a year, I met many, many girls, some of them many times. Baya took the screen test early on, but I wasn't sure, I was riddled with doubt. The choice was difficult and Baya really fought to get the role. She absolutely wanted it; she loved the character and was not afraid of being censored or of doing something forbidden. She is, in fact, more free than Farah, more explosive. She is exceptionally free. This was very precious for embodying the role and it's what convinced me.

**You film the rough areas of Tunis, its nightlife, and namely the bars, the trains, very masculine places, which you enter with the eyes of a woman... Then you go into the country, and primarily to the mining area, where the dusty decors break from the turbulent urban setting.**

There's a barrier that separates these two settings that I feel must be broken, and that it's possible for me to do it. Concretely, during the shoot, it's the scene where Hayet enters the bar that was the most delicate. The extras were real clients of a seedy bar. Each time we redid the scene, the actress had to enter the bar again and each time it was an ordeal. The men, extras that they were, ogled her with insistence, quasi-obscenely, without our asking. All the women participating in the shoot felt the pressure of their look.

I was determined to film Tunisian places with their real atmospheres, the real persons who work or go there, to be faithful to their reality. The suburban train, the bars, the bus station are filmed in documentary fashion. The idea was to inject the fiction of the film into these terribly alive, teeming places of the city... right up to the dusty phosphate mines, the hotbed of resistance when Ben Ali was in power. The workers play their proper role. This scene creates a break in the film, allowing for taking a step back in relation to the story, a kind of zoom backwards that attempts to draw a map of the country. To remember that the words of the songs come from afar, that the impression of suffocating is deep, buried beneath several social strata. The scene is a tribute to these workers (still in conflict with the authorities today), first of all to evoke their resistance, which prepared the country to rise up against the government. Resistance started early, in 2008, long before Bouazizi's now famous attempt to immolate himself.

**The music in the film is the vector for a kind of resistance. Khyam Allami, an Iraqi, composed it.**

Music and dance are releases that have always existed in popular Tunisian culture. The traditional music, "Mezwed", the dances, the festivities during marriages are truly intense occasions, allowing emotional release for the people. Today, Tunisian rap is emerging from the poor districts. It is a real refuge for some, and manifests a strong resistance movement that reaches a great many. The State is visibly very afraid of these rapper-protestors since it fights and arrests them for what they cry out in their songs. The music was the biggest challenge of the film. Not only did I have to find an actress who sings, but I needed to create a band, compose the music, write the songs. Sometimes I thought it would be impossible. I met countless musicians, but we never succeeded in getting along.

And then one day by chance I was at a concert in Paris and I discovered a band whose music simply took me away: the Alif Ensemble. Khyam is one of five musicians from various Arabic countries (Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine, Iraq). His energy, his training is very close to what I wanted. I also discovered that the band's stringed-instrument maker is Iraqi, and that he had lived in Tunisia for the past three years. He spoke Tunisian, knew the places where I wanted to shoot the film, the underground life of the youth there, Baya... Everything went really fast and was really simple after that. Khyam and I were completely in tune; I consulted him when I did the casting, we created the band together. He composed the songs for Baya's voice and rehearsed the band for weeks before the shooting even started. That brought them together; they became a real band. We all loved the music. Filming the musical scenes with the live performance of the band were real moments of exaltation for the entire film crew.

For the lyrics I worked with an old friend of mine, Ghassen Amami, who also works in cinema. Each song had to procure a specific feeling in relation to the moment it was sung in the film; each participates in the dramaturgy. Some of the songs were written in one go, others required reworking several times. The lyrics are deeply rooted in the Tunisia of today.

**Your film is going to be projected at the Venice Film Festival. Few Arabic films have achieved this. And it is extremely rare in Tunisia to shoot one's first feature film at age 30: via Farah, it's the youth of the entire country who are invited with you to Venice.**

I am very happy and proud of having been selected. It's true that I think it's too bad that the visibility of Arabic cinema isn't greater. But what's important is that it comes from our countries and is something other than religious extremism; it allows others to discover those who resist, who dream, who create, to reveal that there are other voices, other possible references... I hope that being part of the Venice Festival will give the film greater visibility, and will provide people with the opportunity to discover a Tunisia they don't know, allow them to better grasp what happened and why it happened.

At the same time I'm impatient to show the film in my own country. I'm curious to see what it will stir up – a few controversies probably, but I hope above all that it reaches a young public, who can't always identify with Tunisian film. I turned thirty the day after the shooting was over; I think the film talks about my generation. It's true that it's pretty rare in Tunisia to make a feature film at a young age. But there are many other films of young directors currently in preparation or in post-production; I think that our cinema is in the process of renewing itself.

By Mhaa Ben Abdeladhim, journalist and editor, Paris, July 2015

**Director Bio:**

Leyla Bouzid was born in 1984 and grew up in Tunis. In 2003 she went to Paris to study French literature at the Sorbonne University and film directing at the Femis School.

She made *Soubresauts (Mkhobbi Fi Kobba)*, her thesis film in Tunisia, a few months before the Jasmine Revolution. She then directed *Zakaria* in the south of France with a non-professional cast. These two short films received a very warm welcome in festivals in France and abroad, playing at more than sixty festivals and receiving a dozen awards. *As I Open My Eyes* is her first feature film.

**Cast:**

Farah...Baya Medhaffar  
Hayet....Ghalia Benali  
Borhene...Montassar Ayari  
Ali...Aymen Omrani  
Mahmoud...Lassaad Jamoussi  
Ines....Deena Abdelwahed  
Ska....Youssef Soltana  
Sami...Marwen Soltana  
Ahlem...Najoua Mathlouthi  
Moncef....Youness Ferhi  
The Poet at the Bar...Fathi Akkeri  
Hamida....Saloua Mohammed

**Crew:**

Director...Leyla Bouzid  
Producers....Sandra Da Fonseca and Imed Marzouk  
Associate Producers....Nathalie Mesuret, Bertrand Gore  
Screenwriters...Leyla Bouzid, Marie-Sophie Chambon  
Original Score.....Khyam Allami  
Cinematography.....Sebastien Goepfert  
Editing.....Lilian Corbeille  
Sound...Ludovic Van Pachterbeke  
Sound Mixing.....Remi Gerard