



FATIMA

A film by Philippe Faucon

Winner, 2016 César Award, Best Picture

Winner, 2015 Prix Louis-Delluc Award

Official Selection, 2015 Director's Fortnight, Cannes Film Festival

2015 / France, Canada / 79 min. / In French, Arabic with English subtitles

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Synopsis:

Fatima lives on her own with two daughters to support: 15-year-old Souad, a teenager in revolt, and 18-year-old Nesrine, who is starting medical school. Fatima speaks French poorly and is constantly frustrated by her daily interactions with her daughters. Her pride and joy, they are also a source of worry. To ensure the best possible future for them, she works odd hours as a cleaning woman. One day, she takes a fall on the stairs. On leave, Fatima begins to write to her daughters in Arabic thoughts she has never been able to express in French.

Director's Statement:

My grandparents didn't speak French, and neither did my mother when she was a child. They were "the invisible ones" in the society they lived in. Some of Fatima's manners remind me of them. She is like those women, only partly schooled, who had to emigrate out of vital necessity, to come and live in a country whose language and codes were completely unknown to them. In France, they gave birth to children and raised them, even though sometimes they were kept apart by the language or by different customs and points of reference. For all these reasons, regardless of the things they didn't know or master, these women have developed major resources, drawn from fierce courage and obstinacy. -Philippe Faucon

Interview with Philippe Faucon:

What made you want to loosely adapt Fatima Elayoubi's "Prière à la lune" (Prayer to the Moon)?

Fabienne Vonier came to me with the project, which she was supposed to produce. "Prayer to the Moon" is a short collection of poems, thoughts and other pieces of writing. When I first read it, I was at a loss what to do with it, cinema-wise. Only when I met Fatima Elayoubi did I really understand Fabienne's feeling about it. Fatima is an extraordinary character. She came to France, following her husband, and since she didn't know how to write or speak French, she had only access to menial jobs. She has worked as a cleaning lady all her life, and only started to write and speak French belatedly, because her working hours and the hardships of life hardly left her any time to study. She learned almost on her own, by spelling out and reading aloud everything she could get her hands on. Today, her expression is rich and meticulous, you can feel her need to find the exact word to properly convey all her thoughts and feelings. I developed a personal connection to the project, even though it wasn't easy to write, let alone to finance: the subject didn't call for a crowd-pleasing cast, and the film was partly subtitled. Due to health reasons, Fabienne finally had to give up producing it, and she proposed Yasmina Nini-Faucon and myself to take it up as producers.

While Fatima is the main character, you draw the portrait of three women from different generations – or at least, different age groups – and, through them, you get to tackle specific issues.

Indeed, because these women live in the same family unit, with strong affects, but also in different worlds, which creates or sometimes increases gaps, misconceptions or lacks of understanding between them. First and foremost, there are language barriers, bringing to light differences between their own separate worlds. Fatima doesn't understand a thing about Nesrine's student talk, or about Souad's street language. Just like both girls are clueless about their mother's writings in Arabic in her notebook.

As a matter of fact, Fatima's poor command of French is a source of confinement, isolation, or even alienation for her...

It is a daily handicap, in social relations but also in her relationship with her daughters, who have always spoken French. Each of these three women uses a language register which is congruent with her own personal history and cultural environment. Fatima does all she can to learn French, by questioning Nesrine or Souad, or by going to adult literacy courses, when she finds the time in between her working hours as a cleaning lady. She gets really frustrated when she has a hard time communicating with her daughters, and she tries her best to keep up to date with Souad's studies, regardless of her own deficiencies and Souad's mockery. Nesrine speaks a second-generation immigrant's French; through her reading and studies, she has taken hold of something her parents couldn't provide. If you listen carefully to her, you will notice a few "mistakes" that still "betray" her social background. As for Souad, her language is typical of a fifteen-year-old kid in this type of social environment – it is at once limited, creative and provocative,

with expressions that tend to baffle her mother, like “Stop saying this boy isn’t good enough for me! Like I came out of some golden hen’s ass!”

You bring to light different kinds of violence: the insidious type of Fatima’s middle-class employer, the underlying type of the landlord who won’t rent her apartment to a woman wearing a veil, and the more obvious type, with Souad’s outbursts at her mother.

Souad’s violence is directly connected to the violence Fatima is subjected to, even if she also aims it at her mother, blaming her for being a “sucker” only good at being exploited. But at some point Souad cracks up, and you can see where all her rage comes from: she just cannot accept what her mother has to go through. Fatima understands it when she writes on her diary: “Wherever a parent gets hurt, there is an angry child.”

That being said, you chose to show an example of successful integration. Could it be said that this film is a kind of reversed double of your previous film, *The Disintegration*?

Absolutely. When we showed *The Disintegration*, we sometimes used this image: “A falling tree makes more noise than a growing forest”. I thought that we should also tell the story of the growing forest, and *Fatima* gave us an opportunity to do just that.

The neighbors’ perspective is scathing, as though hurling the characters back to their conditions, thus preventing emancipation. What made you think of it?

Human nature. We all tend, to some degree, to envy or denigrate those who have succeeded where we have failed. It is not specific to the film’s characters. But here, the feeling that someone is freeing herself from a dull life and humdrum circumstances while one remains confined - maybe out of resignation - probably reinforces the bitterness of one’s stance.

This stance echoes that of the snitches at Fatima’s workplace.

This is an environment where work is dehumanized, tiresome and dull. And for some of Fatima’s colleagues, the boss’ favors are a kind of escape mechanism.

What does Fatima’s fall down the stairs mean to you? Should it be seen as a call for help?

It is common knowledge that workplace accidents seldom come out of nowhere. At this moment in the film, Fatima has probably reached a breaking point. She just cannot face all the difficulties in her life any more. She’s overwhelmed by her fear to see Nesrine fail at her studies, which have cost them so much effort. And she is plagued by the thought that Souad, her youngest daughter, might not be able to free herself from her own social exclusion.

Where does Fatima's urge to write come from?

From her need to express in her own language what she cannot say in the language of her daughters or in that of the society they live in.

The film is stripped-down piece of work, in which emotion suddenly arises now and again, without ever indulging in sentimentalism.

Sentimentalism, pomposity and over-elaboration are merely distortions of the truth. And only when you reach the truth in a character or its interpretation can you really achieve genuine emotion. So you must strip the writing, the directing and the performance of everything that is turning the film away from what really matters - all that pointless and meaningless stuff that Pïala called the "fatty part" of a scene.

You take on a naturalist style, yet without making a documentary. What were your priorities as far as mise-en-scène is concerned?

Finding points of convergence with the actors, between them and their characters, in the various acting situations they were to face. It is an adventure where you have to summon up all your resources for attention, intuition and exchange, to bring something unique to character personification on screen. If you can achieve this, you are no longer in a documentary. And you also steer clear of naturalism, in the pejorative sense of the word, that is to say the dull, disembodied reproduction of reality.

How did you select your three main actresses?

For the main part we had to look for a non-professional actress, as for several of my other films – simply because there isn't an actress in France to play such a character: a woman of North African descent, with poor command of French. It was tricky, especially for the character of Fatima, because it is a complex part, with numerous technical difficulties, requiring a type of performance that might be challenging for someone without any acting experience. Our researches took us to Morocco, where I met interesting Moroccan actresses, but none of them was the right age for the part. So I chose a non-professional actress, Soria Zërual, from Lyon, but we both were a bit anxious before the first day of the shooting. Everyone agreed that she had shown nice things on her screen test, but there was no way to know for sure that she could carry this complex part right to the end. Today I know it was the right choice: I find her performance really convincing. Fatima's daughters, who are 15 and 18, are played by young women who want to become actresses, but who, owing to their young ages, haven't played many parts yet. Zita Hanrot, who plays the eldest daughter, was trained at the Conservatoire de Paris, and Kenza-Noah Aïche appeared in a short film.

I think the three of them felt real connections with their characters, but also with themselves - a kind of convergence that took them far away from the mere "been there, done that." For all these reasons, they bring true moments of grace to the film.

Why did you choose to shoot in the Lyon area?

Because the Rhône-Alpes region stood by us right from the start, in a major way. So I situated the story there, which wasn't a big deal, and we started casting parts there. Some interior shots were also shot in Marseille, since the Provence-Alpe-Côte d'Azur region also got involved in the project.

Tell me about the music we can hear in the opening and closing credits.

We wanted to avoid the obvious soundtrack. The musician suggested several themes, and we settled on a musical ensemble where instruments like the piano or the cello answered an instrument with less "noble" connotations, the accordion, and an oriental instrument, the oud.

Was the film difficult to finance?

Yes, as I was telling you earlier. Due to its subject, the film couldn't rely on a famous cast (a non-professional and two young actresses), it was also partly subtitled, without much drama, and the emotion or the beauty in a character would only emerge (if it was achieved during the shooting or the editing process) in a series of small events. So it was really the opposite of the received wisdoms in today's film funding: a "cast-iron" script, a crowd-pleasing cast, etc. Here the film isn't "cast-iron", it is open, it is the starting point of a work yet to materialize, searching for life on screen. And the same logic prevailed for the casting: we wanted to give life to characters, as authentic as possible, before "boasting" famous names. This is the cinema I love to make.

Philippe Faucon Filmography:

1989- L'AMOUR, Cannes Film Festival

1992- SABINE

1994- MURIEL FAIT LE DÉSESPOIR DE SES PARENTS

1996- MES DIX-SEPT ANS (BEING SEVENTEEN)

1996- TOUT N'EST PAS EN NOIR

1998- LES ÉTRANGERS (THE STRANGERS)

2000- SAMIA, Venice Film Festival

2002- GRÉGOIRE PEUT MIEUX FAIRE

2005- LA TRAHISON, Toronto International Film Festival

2008- DANS LA VIE

2008- D'AMOUR ET DE RÉVOLTES

2009- MAKING OFF

2012- LA DÉSINTÉGRATION, Venice Film Festival (THE DISINTEGRATION)

2015- FATIMA, Director's Fortnight, Cannes Film Festival

Cast:

Fatima.... Soria Zeroual

Nesrine.... Zita Hanrot

Souad.... Kenza Noah Aïche

The father.... Chawki Amari

Crew:

Directed by.... Philippe Faucon

Written by.... Philippe Faucon

Script and dialogue consultants.... Aziza Boudjellal, Yasmina Nini-Faucon and Mustapha Kharmoudi

Loosely based on the books by Fatima Elayoubi: *Prière à la Lune et Enfin, Je Peux Marcher Seule*

Cinematography.... Laurent Fénart

Producers (France).... Yasmina Nini-Faucon, Philippe Faucon

Producer (Canada).... Serge Noël

Executive Producer.... Nadim Cheikhrouha

Editing.... Sophie Mandonnet

Sound.... Thierry Morlaas-Lurbe

Original Music.... Robert-Marcel Lepage

Costumes.... Nezha Rahil