

BARNEY PRODUCTION PRESENTS



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UN CERTAIN REGARD
2023 OFFICIAL SELECTION

HOUNDS

A FILM BY KAMAL LAZRAQ

WITH AYOUB ELAID AND ABDELLATIF MASSTOURI

2023 • MOROCCO, FRANCE, BELGIUM, QATAR, SAUDI ARABIA • COLOR • 1:85 - 5.1 • LENGTH: 94 MIN

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SYNOPSIS



In the suburbs of Casablanca, Hassan and Issam, father and son, live from day to day by carrying out small trafficking jobs for the local mafia. One evening, they are tasked with kidnapping a man. Trapped in a long night, they have no idea what awaits them...

INTERVIEW WITH KAMAL LAZRAQ

***Hounds* is your first feature film. How did you begin in the film industry?**

I was born and I grew up in Morocco, and moved to Paris when I was 18 to study law and political science. It was in Paris that I discovered certain films that were a turning point for me; strangely these films were very different from what I would later make. For instance, Ingmar Bergman's *Autumn Sonata* was my first shock, as it made me understand the full span of powerful emotions that cinema could convey. Then I discovered films that are closer to what I make now: Italian neorealism, Ken Loach's films, 1970s American cinema... Then I entered the FEMIS school through the competitive entry exam, and truly started making films. As part of the school curriculum, we practiced through specifically framed briefs that allowed us to experiment broadly. This was when I first realized I enjoyed working with nonprofessional actors. In *Hounds*, there are practically only nonprofessionals, like in my graduating film, *Dra-ri* (Cinéfondation Second Prize), which I filmed in Casablanca. Working with nonprofessionals allows for great freedom, flexibility, and adaptability. I didn't feel like making the kind of cinema where you have to wait two hours for the light to be perfect. I made a second short film, *Moul Lkelb* (*The Man With a Dog*), which takes place over the course of one night, in the underground world of dogfighting. This short film led me to *Hounds*, as an extension of the same sphere.

The film appears improvised at times: did you have a complete screenplay ahead of the shoot or did you improvise as you were filming?

The screenplay was written very precisely. However, working with nonprofessionals you must expect the unexpected. My actors come from very difficult social environments, some suffer from addictions... I rewrote certain scenes on the go in the morning because one of the actors couldn't manage. I had warned the crew and the director of photography that the two actors constituted the very core of the film, and that they were great but not professional actors. They are extremely intense in front of the camera, and they are just as intense in real life. The goal was to make sure we did not dampen their natural intensity with too many technical constraints. They systematically failed to hit their marks, for instance, so our method had to be adapted to fit them.

Relying on the pared down codes of film noir, *Hounds* addresses a lot of subjects. For instance, the father-son relationship, which seems to be reversed.

In Morocco, conceptions of father figures and masculinity are very different than in Western cultures. In Morocco, there is great respect towards one's father, whose words are not to be contested, and there is no room for adolescent rebellion or acting out. When we told the actor who plays the son, "this man will be your father," a form of deference established itself. The film's trajectory can be defined as follows: a son who accepts everything from his father when deep down he knows very well that his father makes the wrong decision.

At the same time, Issam (the son) obeys reluctantly, and even allows himself to criticize or scold Hassan, his father.

Yes, despite his reluctance, he follows him and never abandons him. Yet, he voices some really harsh things. At some point, Issam takes the wheel, physically and symbolically. He realizes that his father has lost his grip. When I wrote the screenplay, I didn't want to make a psychologically-charged film, as it seemed to me that the father-son relationship would better be served by body language, looks and glances, silences... The film is set in pure action and over a short span of time, therefore the characters have no time for long exchanges of dialog. It is their actions, their decisions, their non-choices that enlighten us with respect to the characters' psychology and their relationship. As a viewer, I think it is more interesting not to have all the keys, to have room for interpretation and freedom in how we read them.

The "hounds" are also the gangs of mobsters constantly involved in face-offs. As in typical film noir movies, organized crime provides a social lens to observe the country.

The context of organized crime translated a certain social destitution. Illegal activities are a means to survive. At the beginning, Hassan wants to buy some meat for his mother but he can't afford to. So he agrees to perform a task for one of the gangs. Morocco has been developing but there is a significant section of society that is left behind, people who find themselves easily caught up in spirals like the one shown in the film. My actors come from this type of background. Yet, despite the harshness, and at times even a form of sheer brutality on the gangsters' part, there's a profoundly human streak in these populations. While conducting casting calls, I met dozens of young people from these underprivileged neighborhoods and when we discussed with them the somewhat dangerous episodes of their lives, they'd always say: "I wish I didn't have to do this but I have no choice." This social dimension was one of the film's strong features. When we filmed in these neighborhoods, people would come over and ask for some money. Survival was a constant, pervasive presence.

Religion is present as well, through magic as when the van starts after a prayer, and through a certain irony: Hassan commits a ton of illegal or amoral things yet he is keen on burying the man they've killed according to religious rites.

Religion has an overarching presence in Moroccan culture; I would even say that it is a form of superstition: the fear of being cursed, the fear of being subjected to divine punishment... People can accept things that aren't right for the purpose of survival, but this overbearing superstition is always there. Even people who have the best education or with the most Cartesian minds have this dimension in them. In the dialog, God is always there: God help you, may God's wrath be upon you, may God guide you, etc. It is something profoundly rooted in the Moroccan way of being. And it infused a certain irony throughout the film.

Hounds is not a comedy. However, it reminded me of the Cohen brothers' cinema in the sense that the characters are caught up in a spiral of events that they have no control over. It also brought to mind Hitchcock's saying that it is difficult to make a dead body disappear: this difficulty is the very backbone of your film's narrative.

The film is not a comedy per se; it is very dark, and yet it does include this undercurrent of irony. I also injected a dose of farce as well as a dimension verging on the absurd. What I had in mind was the figure of Sisyphus and his rock. In truth, my intention was not to aim for pure comedy or farce, but when you roam the outskirts of Casablanca at night, this farcical dimension is decidedly present: people are often like pure characters playing it up for the gallery. I think that the film's drollery comes more from this documentary side than from an actual intention on my part to emphasize this dimension. My relationship with Casablanca has greatly influenced my writing.

Irony is also present in the film's narrative arc: Hassan is constantly sidetracked and ends up being thrown right into the lion's mouth - the rival gang.

This trajectory itself embodies the theme of the absurd. We mentioned Sisyphus, and what happens to Hassan is quite similar. His path follows a loop and he ends up precisely in the spot he was supposed to avoid at all costs. It starts at dawn and ends at dawn. This gives the film an existential dimension as well. Hassan fights to try and make his way out of all this, but in the end he is right back where he left off. On a surface level, the film's story is quite simple: the goal is to get rid of a body. The social, existentialist, and filial aspects are all underlying layers of the film.

The film takes place at night, the cinematography is superb, and the actors' faces are amazing. How did you work with Amine Berrada, your experienced director of photography?

I knew Amine, as we both studied at the FEMIS school a few years apart. I really like his work and wanted to work with him. Besides, he speaks the

language. The first subject I brought up with him was the fact that the technical approach could not overwhelm the actors. Amine understood that point very quickly. For each sequence, we took the time to set up a specific type of lighting allowing the actors and the crew to move about freely, nearly in a 360° range. I also told him that I wanted something very organic, visually, something very physical that embraced flaws. I didn't want us to make something smooth and polished as I prefer grainy images bordering on viscous. On set, we adapted every day based on what actually happened. For the scene by the well, Amine had planned to install spotlights on cranes in order to light the entire area around the well, but it was too heavy and complicated, the actors didn't really understand, and we ended up with a visual rendering that was too conventional. We looked at one another, understanding that this wasn't where we wanted to take the film. In the end, we turned on the van's headlights, and looked at the resulting effect: the faces would suddenly appear out of the darkness and then disappear back into the darkness... And we told ourselves "This is it; now, this is our film." We don't see everything perfectly, there are flaws, but it is vivid and life-like, which is very much the film's overall flair.



Can you tell us about Ayoub Elaïd, who plays Issam, the son, with such incredible intensity?

I worked with a Moroccan casting director, Amine Louadni, who has contacts in all of Casablanca's working class neighborhoods. I met a hundred or so young men. I noticed Ayoub on a photo, and he made me think of Franco Citti in *Accatone*. We met, I filmed him, and he truly exuded a Pasolinian vibe. I continued casting, and when I tried to see Ayoub again he had disappeared. I searched for him and found him in his native village. He came to us but he didn't understand: "I'm not an actor," he kept saying. He had to be convinced. I spent time with him in his neighborhood, we had coffee and it put him more at ease. There was this great intensity in all of his movements, even when he stirred his spoon in his coffee! Being on set was a turning point: he got into the game, instantly understood what was at stake. He wasn't given lines; I would explain to him the important aspects of the sequence and he would play it, making it his own, without having to learn any lines. He surprised us all. He behaved like a professional actor but with his raw authenticity. Working with him was a mix between small, very precise prompts ("be angry... look up") and his freedom to make the scene his own.

Hassan, the father, is played by Abdellatif Masstouri, a man who is both beautiful and hasn't been spared by life.

I couldn't find a nonprofessional actor for the father. Above a certain age, the men I would meet were rather intimidated while Hassan is someone who is very determined. In the end, it was Ayoub who introduced me to Abdellatif, seeing that I wasn't finding anyone. Abdellatif was running a small stand serving grilled sardines. His face, which is both radiant and battered, impressed me. We approached him, ran a few tests with the two actors, and it worked. Abdellatif has had a very heavy life, verging on epic: he travelled around Europe, was a taekwondo champion, did some jail time... He had something to bring to the table, something to express. He too understood very quickly how filmmaking worked. There were times when he was tired, and others when he'd get in trouble with the local guys, but as with Ayoub, I'd established a relationship with him ahead of the shoot, and because of that he was truly engaged. The two of them were happy and proud to see that a film crew trusted them, they wanted to make things work.

Can you tell us about Abdellah Lebkiri, who plays Dib, the clan leader, and whose acting and photogenic qualities are impressive as well?

He is one of the rare actors in my cast who had already acted professionally, in television in particular. Like Ayoub, he wasn't given lines. He is extremely talented and quickly stepped into the role. Sometimes, it even became a little scary, as he wouldn't leave his character behind! At the end of the film, when Dib and Hassan have a violent argument, it wasn't a written sequence: the two actors really had it out! I had to improvise, based on this negative energy, telling Abdellatif/Hassan to "Get out... Go outside!" as the fight between them really had to be broken up. It was all part of our approach, we had to remain open for unexpected and unforeseen things, accidents – all of this carried the film. It is a method that entails risks, but it was well worth it, especially in Morocco with such richly complex characters played by nonprofessional actors.



KAMAL LAZRAQ



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Born in Casablanca in 1984, Kamal Lazraq graduated from the FEMIS school in 2011 after studying in the film direction department. His graduation short film, *Drari*, received the Cinéfondation Second Prize in Cannes, and the Short film Grand Prize at the Entrevues de Belfort Film Festival. In 2013, he directed another short film, *Moul Lkelb (The Man With a Dog)*, which received numerous awards in international film festivals. *Hounds* is his first feature film, and has received the 2021 Gan Foundation for Cinema grant.

CAST

Issam
Hassan
Speech-impaired man
Dib
Larbi
Jalil
Jellouta

Ayoub Elaid
Abdellatif Masstouri
Mohamed Hmimsa
Abdellah Lebkiri
Lahcen Zaimouzen
Salah Bensalah
Mohammed Kharbouchi

CREW

Director
Producer
Coproducers
Screenplay
Composer
Director of Photography
Editing
Sound

Casting Director
Coproduction

Production countries

Length
Distribution in France

Kamal Lazraq
Saïd Hamich Benlarbi
Diana Elbaum et David Ragonig
Kamal Lazraq
P.R2B
Amine Berrada
Héloïse Pelloquet et Stéphane Myczkowski
Thomas Van Pottelberge
Thibaud Rie
Hugo Fernandez
Philippe Charbonnel
Amine Louadni
Mont Fleuri Production,
Barney Production, Beluga Tree
Morocco, France, Belgium,
Qatar, Saudi Arabia
94 min
Ad Vitam