



© *La nuit et l'enfant*

# La nuit et l'enfant

## The Night and the Kid

David Yon

**Producer** Carine Chichkowsky, Guillaume Morel, Karim Aitouna, Thomas Micoulet. **Production companies** Survivance (Paris, France); Hautlesmains Productions (Lyon, France). **Director** David Yon. **Screenplay** David Yon, Zoheir Mefti, Bachar Lamine. **Director of photography** David Yon. **Sound** Bertrand Lariou. **Music** Jean D.L., Sandrine Verstraete. **Editor** Jérémy Gravat. **Cast** Lamine Bachar (Lamine), Aness Baitich (The Kid).

DCP, colour. 61 min. Arabic.

**Premiere** 9 February 2015, Berlinale Forum

**Contact:** Hautlesmains Productions

A child throws stones at the moon. They say the sun has gone and will only return when anxiety has disappeared. Until then, the stars are there to offer comfort. So the child counts the stars in the night's endless expanse on the slopes of the Algerian Atlas mountains. Aness, the child, is the companion of Lamine, a young man on the run. Both are being pursued by nameless people carrying arms. Who are these criminals? Why must the two of them hide and sleep at night with weapons in their hands? Is the child merely a figment of Lamine's imagination? A desire made flesh? Narrated elliptically and associatively, *La nuit et l'enfant* tells of omnipresent danger and constant threats. The film moves between realism and dream: Almost documentary-like shots alternate with powerful, poetic imagery. In the 90s, the Djelfa region was a terrorist stronghold. Lamine says that life was different before the terrorists came. Without dogma and with plenty of room for interpretation, this film is the account of a young generation's will to live, a generation which must set boundaries even as it suffers. David Yon has created a dark, atmospheric fable reminiscent of the story of another little prince.

*Cécile Tollu-Polonowski*

## Algeria's bloody legacy

After *The Birds of Arabia*, my first film, I soon felt the need to return to Djelfa, Algeria, and shoot a second one. What the young people have to say, their connection to the landscape and to history, called for a film to be made. While in *The Birds of Arabia*, one would hear voices of the past – the correspondence between the anarchist Antonio Atarès and Simone Weil – I wanted this new film, *La nuit et l'enfant*, to feature the present-day voices of Djelfa. The region was once populated by nomadic tribes. A pocket of the Algerian War of Independence and a hotbed of terrorism in the 1990s, its heavy historical legacy weighs so much that threat intrinsically pertains to it. But despite the blood legacy received, the young Algerians I have met struck me with how they have made this landscape their own, how they took me to places still considered by others to be sullied by danger. One of the main shooting locations in *La nuit et l'enfant* is La Mare Blanche, an oasis in the middle of the steppes. During the 1990s, terrorists came along and the farmers left. Now, 'The White Pond' is uninhabited, frozen in the traces of former violence.

Over time, trust has developed between me and my friends in Djelfa, the Lahrech brothers: Salah, Ilyes, Idriss and Boubaker. They have assisted me in the long-term filming process. This enables us to consider making a film a collective experiment, a way of setting free both words and bodies. They all are truly active in the making of the film, made with them and not about them.

In the course of my trips to Djelfa, a powerful character emerged, embodied by Lamine Bachar, the film's main character and a friend of the Lahrech brothers. His commitment to and passion for filmmaking have resulted in the film being built around him and his natural talent for creating a character, both his extended self and someone else. I am susceptible to his way of giving himself and to his graceful, concrete, tangible approach to his environment. The film has been developed by three voices: Algerian filmmaker Zoheir Mefti's, Lamine's and mine.

In the film, by inventing rituals of his own, Lamine tries to have 'the ruins re-flower' within a seemingly endless night, accompanied by a child who is his confidant. I hope this is what the film will document: history seeping out of the landscape and young people calling upon it by means of a film, aiming at setting themselves free of it.

David Yon

### "My desire was to make a film that would be a collective emotional experience"

*The film has evolved over a long period of time. Could you tell us about how the project started and how it has changed over the course of several years? First more of a documentary, it has turned increasingly into a drama...*

**David Yon:** While shooting my first film in Djelfa in 2007, I met young people of my age, the Lahrech brothers Salah, Ilyes, Idriss, and Boubaker, who became my friends. I regularly returned to see them and my desire to make a film with them and those in their inner circle kept increasing.

The first idea was inspired by their Spanish great-grandmother, who had been kidnapped by Emir Abdelkader and had to marry one of his lieutenants. The point was to find something between documentary and drama, based on history.

But once we started asking people around them about this great-grandmother, I realised that the story triggered debates that were more important to their parents' generation than to theirs.

At one point, they said a fictional rather than a documentary film would be better suited to expressing what they wanted to. We tried to figure out what kind of feature we could make together. The only idea I introduced was the one of the sun that no longer rises. As for the formal aspect, I intended to create a type of image in which what is visible keeps disappearing. Working with HD means everything is highly defined, too dense, and I wanted to use darkness and half-light so the image would be full of mystery.

We organised the casting with all the friends of my friends. For them, a feature film is generally an action picture, so several of them walked around the wasteland with a gun. We viewed the footage together and we all agreed that Lamine had the most onscreen presence of them all. Lamine Bachar is Salah Lahrech's best friend as well as the brothers' neighbour. We then decided that Lamine would be the main character, so all we had to do was write the screenplay for the feature.

*Were the texts and dialogue, which at times are quite literary, written before, or are they based on made-up or improvised accounts?*

For the past seven years, I've stayed in Djelfa every year and kept a diary about my impressions, so we did have a written basis. Let me quote a passage that is meaningful to me:

'In Djelfa, I often imagined a water drop on a rock, under full sunlight. This image alluded to my experience there, in a country that isn't mine. With heat, sounds, light, an organic and mineral environment. Experiencing exhaustion made me let go. From a certain point on, I let go of my fear of disappearing, and this is when freedom began. I wish this film to be in love with such freedom.'

An important factor in making this film is I don't speak Arabic and my Algerian friends in Djelfa speak almost no French. Our relationship can't be based on spoken language. This is why I shot situations without focusing on words, being all the more attentive to gesture, movement, light and backdrops appearing in the image. My desire as a director was to make a film that could be a collective emotional experience. For the film to be good, it had to combine elements of a personal story and this search for light, for the representation of man. This is why I asked Algerian filmmaker Zoheir Mefti, who lives in Spain, to provide his artistic help in making the film. Together, we would view the footage I had shot in Algeria, and he helped me to understand what exactly I had shot. I got the meaning of the images after a kind of necessary delay, so I would have the appropriate distance to them and to what they were telling. As we intended to avoid a certain type of realism and to bring in a few fantastical aspects, we wrote a screenplay based on the characters, locations, the accounts we collected, and texts that were previously written.

Zoheir is about the same age as Lamine. They've had similar experiences as they were born in the late 1970s-early '80s. They spent their young years, from the ages of ten to nineteen, during the period of terrorism.

Zoheir had written poetical texts based on his own experience. The script we first wrote was a kind of Western, unfolding as an initiation process: 'After a murder, an adult and a child on the run explore a territory'.

Once this script was translated into Arabic, I was able to discuss it with my friends in Djelfa and do the scene preparations. On the set, I asked Lamine to improvise, starting from a given situation, from written texts, from his own experience and from what he knew about his character. He understood very well that he was playing a role, but that it had to be fuelled by his own experience. He did reveal his very generous, natural talent as an actor. When I asked him if some of his own photographs or texts could be used, he brought several of them. For instance, the voiceover at the beginning of the film is a poem written by Lamine when he was in his twenties.

For a major scene of the film, with that red background, shot on the last day of the first phase of shooting, I asked him to express directly to camera how he felt. I didn't understand what he was saying, but I felt something was going on: he was staging himself, choosing this red background, putting on glasses, he was really taking the film in hand, in order to express through the feature something personal. Back in France, someone translated the scene and I realised that it dealt with his childhood, and with the terrorism that had ruined it. I felt we needed to properly spin the whole story with Lamine, the child, the dark period, the lost childhood, the territory to be explored. This is why we needed a second phase of shooting. Having the opportunity for several scoutings and shootings was a real treat, interweaving writing and editing periods.

#### *When did the child appear?*

As a cousin of the Lahrech brothers, Aness had been with us on location scouting. (You can also see him in the first shot of my first film).

Once when we were strolling around with him and Lamine, I filmed them and this became the daylight scene with bees in the film. I immediately realised that their relationship would be the touchstone of our film. It's about him and the boy. Lamine had touched me because I had felt how sensitive he was, both shy and with a strong longing for another type of life, and something from his childhood was still very strong in him. For him, acting with the child could be a way of revealing himself and the child within.

Aness is now fourteen. When we started shooting he was the same age Lamine was when his childhood was taken away from him. It's an interesting age because as a child, Aness regarded shooting the film as a kind of game. He would, for instance, kick at thistles... so I was inspired by what he was naturally doing on location and have him re-enact it in a shot. But at the same time, his childhood was coming to an end. To him, the most important thing wasn't making a film, but being with adults and doing things with them. Growing up.

#### *What was your shooting method? How did you choose locations?*

We're a small team: just me, operating the camera, and my sound engineer. He's French, and neither of us speaks Arabic. The only person who speaks both languages is Salah, one of the Lahrech brothers, who therefore is our translator and assistant director. All other members of the crew are friends of the Lahrech brothers and not trained at all. They suggested locations where they thought some scenes could be shot. We then all prepared the scenes. Some were in charge of props, wardrobe and light, and others acted.

Most of the locations were outside the town (Djelfa is three hours south of Algiers, at the edge of the desert), in the steppes

and in the forests. That was first of all because we had no shooting permit, but also because this was part of the initial film project. Most of the inhabitants of Djelfa belong to formerly nomadic tribes who used to live in tents out in the steppes, but because of the period of terrorism, they have settled in town in regular houses. My friends and I shared the desire to be on the move again and to re-occupy some deserted places, as an attitude of emancipation.

They were places such as La Mare Blanche, a former farmed oasis, abandoned during the dark period. Two of the Lahrech brothers, one a shepherd and the other a farmer, tried a few years ago to re-farm it and to live in one of the former farm-houses for six months, but the salty spring poisoned some of their sheep. This is a truly important place to them, but they no longer know how to inhabit it.

The military mill, a now-empty colonial building, is a place where my friends like to come together on weekends because of the river, the trees and its location on the outskirts of town. Several young people from Djelfa have written their names and words of love on the walls. It's a kind of place for free expression.

Salt Rock is a striking location near Djelfa, a unique lunar landscape where they took me several times because it looks like a location for a science fiction film. To them, cinema automatically meant stunning settings. That's why we shot a scene there. Another major shooting location was the wasteland in front of the Lahrech house, where Ylyes built a cabin and tends his sheep. Numerous scenes were shot there. It was at once a playground and a set. Since everyone lives nearby, it was easy to organise shooting, and this is also the place where my friends meet every night for discussions, coming together and telling stories around a fire.

*Interview: Sylviane Chirouze*



**David Yon** was born in Provins, France in 1979. He studied Documentary Filmmaking at the Université Stendhal-Grenoble 3 in Grenoble. After his graduation, he co-founded the film magazine *Dérives* (in the meantime online: [www.derives.tv](http://www.derives.tv)). In 2009, David Yon completed his first film, *Les oiseaux d'Arabie / The Birds of Arabia* (40 min).

Apart from being a filmmaker he works as a film curator, conducts workshops, and hosts a radio programme on cinema. *La nuit et l'enfant* is his first full-length feature film.