

KINO LORBER

Presents



CASABLANCA BEATS

A FILM BY NABIL AYOUC



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
COMPETITION
2021 OFFICIAL SELECTION



Morocco, France / 2021 / 101 min / Color / 5.1 / 16:9 / Arabic with English subtitles

Distributor Contact: Clemence Taillandier <clemence@kinolorber.com>

Publicity Contacts: Kate Patterson <kpatterson@kinolorber.com>

Juan Medina <jmedina@kinolorber.com>

Kino Lorber, Inc., 333 West 39 St. Suite 503, New York, 10018, (212) 629-6880

LOGLINE

A former rapper takes a job at a cultural center in an underprivileged neighborhood in Casablanca and inspires his students to break free from the weight of restrictive traditions in order to live their passions and express themselves through the arts.

SYNOPSIS

Director Nabil Ayouch (*Razzia*, *Horses of God*) drew on his own experience opening a youth cultural center in Casablanca for this story of a former rapper named Anas who takes a job teaching hip hop in an underprivileged neighborhood. Despite differences in identity, religion, and politics, Anas encourages his students to bond together and break free from the weight of restrictive traditions in order to follow their passion and express themselves through the arts. Featuring a dynamic ensemble of first-time actors, many of them students of the real-life cultural center where the film was shot, *Casablanca Beats* is a vibrant and inspiring coming-of-age hip hop musical with a decidedly feminist edge. Mixing intimate yet high stakes drama with infectious musical sequences, the film transports audiences to a lively and contemporary Casablanca, far from the clichés about the Arab world. Morocco's official submission to the 94th Academy Awards® offers a refreshing dose of youthful inspiration alongside a powerful message about the liberating power of self-expression.

INTERVIEW

NABIL AYOUC

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO BUILD THE FILM AROUND A HIP-HOP DANCE CLASS?

Because of an encounter. Shortly after we opened the center, this guy showed up, 25- 26, not older. He introduced himself as a former rapper, a world that was now “behind him”, he said. But he’d come with the desire to pass it on. He offered us a program, “The Positive School of Hip-Hop” – classes to teach young people to express themselves and talk about their lives. This was Anas, who became the central character of the film. I observed him for a year with these young people, I saw him make them work, write, re-write, give them confidence in themselves. One day they put on a show and I thought they were incredible. They had talent, they put their daily lives into words so accurately, the times, society, everything. I wanted to meet them. So, I sat with them, and we talked for a long time. I was moved beyond anything I expected. I could see myself as a teenager in the 80s. The times aren’t the same, of course, nor is the country. And yet these are the same problems as in the Sarcelles when I was growing up. I understood everything: their desires, their frustrations, their doubts, their dreams. Through hip-hop, they finally felt they were being listened to.

WHAT IS YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THIS MUSIC?

To be honest, I’m not a big connoisseur. Hip-hop became popular in France while I was a teenager. We all listened to it because suddenly we felt that this music was meant for us. Until the late 90s hip-hop in France was very political. These songs talked about the reality of the suburbs, places no one wanted to hear about. It was powerful. For me, living in Sarcelles, I found an echo of my daily life in rap. And then it gradually became something else, more self-centered, more bling perhaps, and I lost interest. But I found the same political force, the same power of words to shake things up, in the rap of the Maghreb. We saw how this music was at the heart of the Arab Spring. Today it expresses the political voice of an entire youth. With this film, I wanted to give full expression to these voices that take the mike in order to tell us things of great importance, both very personal and yet universal.

IS CASABLANCA BEATS A MUSICAL?

Yes. In any case, that’s how I envisaged it. In the genre, music allows us to get inside the characters, to get closer to them. To understand them better. As in a musical, there’s the main narrative – the daily life of the class, their work, their discussions – with a more naturalistic, a more “improvised” direction, which gives the illusion of a documentary. There, we are confronted with reality, we look at faces, we listen to words, it’s hardcore. And then suddenly, through music and dance, we escape. There, I worked more “formally”, trying to give something new and different to each character, each performance. I wanted it to resemble them. Khalid Benghrib, the choreographer, my DPs Virginie Surdej and Amine Messadi, and I rehearsed these dance numbers a lot, whereas the scenes in the middle were much more a question of depth, meaning and spontaneity. The difficulty lay in linking the two. I wanted the musical to be the heart of reality and reality to be the heart of the musical. Like the tribute scene to West Side Story where they dance facing the fundamentalists. We’re in a musical, but this is also the state of the world,

it's also a very political scene. I wanted life to penetrate everywhere, for the film to be joyful and political, societal and musical.

HOW DID YOU WORK WITH THE ADOLESCENTS AT THE YOUTH CENTRE?

It was a work built on trust, long term. We shot more or less from November 2017 to February 2019. I like to work with non-professionals, it's always a great way to question and force yourself constantly to be on the alert in your relationship with the characters and the shoot. Even if for some of the characters I was inspired by their real lives and stories, these are all fictional characters on screen. What was special was that I always refused to give them a script, to tell them where I wanted to go with them. We talked a lot about their characters, how they felt, and I always tried to find the right distance in my direction of the actors. In the long class scenes, I worked with earpieces. I guided Anas, the teacher, with topics, key phrases, then let things happen, sometimes redefining them. Also with earpieces I guided the camera-people – their positions, which characters to film – although of course Virginie and Amine possess a truly beautiful visual understanding. Over a period of three years I shot, edited, wrote, went back, re-edited, re-wrote... until gradually I started to build a film that truly listens to the characters who inhabit it. This is the first time I've worked with such freedom, and I must say it was a great pleasure.

SO THIS ISN'T A DOCUMENTARY?

No, but I like the idea that the line is blurred. It's always been important in my cinema that you can't tell what's acted and what's real. I want the power of fiction to blend with the power of the lives I'm filming. These young people opened up to me about their lives, I met their parents, I saw where they lived. For me it would have been unthinkable to bring a camera and film it all as it is. So I took inspiration from these encounters, I mixed reality and fiction to get as close as possible to the reality of the suburb of Sidi Moumen.

IT IS A FILM ABOUT YOUTH, AND A FILM ABOUT TEACHING AND THE PASSING ON OF KNOWLEDGE... HOW DO YOU FILM SUCH AN ABSTRACT NOTION?

By showing precisely that there's nothing more physical than teaching. During the pandemic, we were led to believe that teaching could be done through a screen, but it's not true. To teach is to act. To show that learning, it's to be in motion, in contact. There's no substitute for this contact. I wanted the camera to be as close as possible to these exchanges. From as far back as I can remember, from my primary school Albert Camus to my college Evariste Gallois in Sarcelles, the teachers, the instructors, the people who kept this youth club alive, were my heroes. I have massive respect for those who dedicate their lives to passing on their knowledge. I grew up with a mother who was a teacher, who deeply loved teaching, and I saw how she had to fight against hierarchy, against the system, to allow these kids to have a future. I filmed Anas pretty much as a John Ford hero. He arrives alone in this suburb, doesn't talk much, we are deliberately told little about him, except that he is dedicated to his work and these kids. It is also a film about work. Teaching is to teach how to do but also how to re-do. I wanted to show the texts as they're being written, the moments of doubt, of failure. Anas is sometimes tough with the kids but the fact that he is demanding shows them that he's thinking big for them.

YOU ALSO SHOW ALL THE THREATS AGAINST THIS FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION GRADUALLY GETTING CLOSER TO THE CENTRE AS THE FILM PROGRESSES.

The center is a refuge. The minute you're outside, things are a lot more complicated, and bodies perhaps less free, and I wanted to show that. Also that these young people don't let themselves be pushed around, that they try to regain power in the streets. Especially the young girls. I've always been involved in the feminist struggles of this country. I find them extraordinary, these young female rappers, who talk about their bodies, the male gaze, the pressure from their older brothers who want to enslave them. The challenges they face are very strong, and I wanted them to be heard. We sometimes have a somewhat dated image of the youth in the Maghreb. With this film I want to show that, on the contrary, it is as committed, just as modern and political. They simply want to be able to express themselves and be heard. All they need is the opportunity and the means to speak out. Of course, a certain section of the population, very marked by religion and traditions, has every interest in silencing them. It was important for me to show what they are fighting against. But rather than showing everything that could silence them, I think it was even more important to celebrate their voices, to let them resonate loudly, to show that with their bodies and their words, they are resisting.

YET IN THE END, ONE MIGHT THINK THE BATTLE HAS NOT BEEN WON...

On the contrary, the seeds that Anas has sown will grow into ever stronger shoots. He has instilled in these young people a spirit of freedom that cannot be extinguished. And this is the very essence of his work, to give them the tools and the confidence to continue their paths on their own. For these young people, this is only the beginning, a form of renaissance – in their own words: "They're going to hear a big bang and we'll be reborn!" This is fundamental... Despite the lurking violence it is a film full of hope. These young people are much stronger than I was at their age. Their political strength and their incredible energy permeate the film. I wanted the whole world to hear their voices and their stories. They are a sign that the world is changing.

NABIL AYOUCHE BIOGRAPHY

Nabil Ayouch was born on April 1st, 1969, in Paris. He is a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (Academy Awards) and the Académie des Arts et Techniques du Cinéma (César Awards).

His first short film was *Les Pierres Bleues du Désert* (1992), in which Jamel Debbouze made his screen debut. After two further shorts, in 1977 Ayouch directed his first feature, *Mektoub*, which was the Moroccan entry for Best Foreign Language Film at the Academy Awards, as was *Ali Zaoua* (2000), which won 45 international awards. *A Minute of Sun Less* for Arte TV's collection "Masculin/Feminin" (2003), and *Whatever Lola Wants* (Pathé, 2008), followed.

After directing a number of live shows, he conceived and directed the opening of Le Temps du Maroc in France, at the Palace of Versailles, in 1999.

In 2011 he directed his first feature documentary, *My Land*, in the Middle East. In 2012, his next feature, *Horses of God*, which was based on the May 2003 Casablanca bombings, screened in Un Certain Regard at the Cannes Film Festival, where it received the François Chalais Award. It was the official Moroccan submission to the 86th Academy Awards®, represented Morocco at the Golden Globes, and won 26 international awards.

In May 2015 his next film, *Much Loved* was selected at Cannes in Directors' Fortnight. It won the Best Director and Best Actress awards at the Angoulême Film Festival in September of that year. Banned in Morocco, *Much Loved* was released in some 20 countries and won 12 international awards.

In 2016, he directed *Razzia*, which made its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2017 (Platform) and went on to win a dozen international awards.

In 2019, he produced *Adam*, directed by Marym Touzani, which world premiered at Cannes (Un Certain Regard). The film, which has been sold in 20 countries, has won 30 awards to date and enjoyed widespread public and critical success.

In 2021, Nabil Ayouch presents *Casablanca Beats* in Official Competition at the Cannes Film Festival – a feature film about young people expressing themselves through Hip-hop in the outskirts of Casablanca.

Beyond his own films, Ayouch is deeply involved – through Ali n' Productions, which he created in 1999 – in energizing the Moroccan film landscape by supporting young talent through a variety of initiatives, beginning with The Mohamed Reggab Prize, a screenplay and production competition of 8 short films shot in 35mm. Through the creation of Film Industry, between 2005 and 2010, he produced some 40 genre films, contributing to the creation of a real film industry that discovers and develops talents in all areas of cinema. In 2006, he launched Meda Films Development, with the support of the European Union and of the Marrakech International Film

Festival Foundation, a development support structure for producers and screenwriters from the ten countries of the southern shore of the Mediterranean.

Always very active in the socio-cultural field, in 2014 Ayouch opened through the Ali Zaoua Foundation – which he created and chairs – Les étoiles de Sidi Moumen, a cultural center for young people in the district of Sidi Moumen, home of the suicide bombers who committed the Casablanca attacks of May 16, 2003, and who inspired *The Horses of God*. To date, more than 1,000 young people have enrolled and are learning all forms of artistic expression. A second cultural center followed in 2006 in Tangiers, a third in Agadir in 2019, and a fourth in Fez in 2020. A fifth center is planned for 2021 in Marrakesh. It is in the first of these centers that Nabil Ayouch directed ***Casablanca Beats*** between November 2017 and February 2019...



SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

2021 CASABLANCA BEATS

Cannes Film Festival 2021 – In Competition, Official Selection

2017 RAZZIA

Toronto International Film Festival – Platform Official Selection Represents Morocco at the Academy Awards®.

2015 MUCH LOVED

Cannes Film Festival – Directors' Fortnight
Angoulême Francophone Film Festival

Valois d'or Award for Best Film & Valois for Best Actress. Lumières Award for Best Foreign Film - 12 Awards

2012 HORSES OF GOD

Cannes Film Festival 2012 – Official Selection

Official Moroccan submission to the Academy Awards® Lumières Award for Best Foreign Film - 26 Awards

2011 MY LAND

Tangiers Film Festival 2011 – Best Music and Best Editing Awards Tetouan International

Mediterranean Film Festival 2012

Best Documentary Award

Cinéalma Festival (Nice) – Coup de Cœur du Public Award Fameck Festival of Arabic Film – Press Award

2008 WHATEVER LOLA WANTS

National Moroccan Film Festival (2008) – Best Film Award

2000 ALI ZAOUA

Official Moroccan submission to the Academy Awards® - 45 Awards.

1998 MEKTOUB

Official Moroccan submission to the Academy Awards® Cairo International Film Festival –

Award for Best Arabic Film and Best First Film

Special Jury Award, Oslo

1994 VENDEUR DE SILENCE

Tangiers National Film Festival – Best Director Award Selected at numerous international film festivals.

1993 HERTZIENNE CONNEXION *Broadcast on Arte TV*

1992 LES PIERRES BLEUES DU DÉSERT *Canal + Award in Bastia, Corsica*

CAST

Anas – **ANAS BASBOUSI**
Ismail – **ISMAIL ADOUAB**
Meriem – **MERIEK NEKKACH**
Nouhaila – **NOUHAILA ARIF**
Zineb – **ZINEB BOUJEMAA**
Abdou – **ABDELILAH BASBOUSI**
Mehdi – **MEHDI RAZZOUK**
Amina – **AMINA KANNAN**
Soufiane – **SOUFIANE BELALI**
Samah – **SAMAH BARIGOU**
Marwa Maha – **MAHA MENAN**

CREW

Directed by **NABIL AYOUC**
Screenplay **NABIL AYOUC**
With the collaboration of **MARYAM TOUZANI**
DPs **VIRGINIE SURDEJ & AMINE MESSADI**
Original Music **MIKE AND FABIEN KOURTZER**
Editors **MARIE-HÉLÈNE DOZO, YASSIR HAMANI & JULIA GRÉGORY**
Sound **SAMUEL AÏCHOUN, SAÏD RADI NASSIM EL MOUNABBIH & RYM DEBBAGH-MOUNIR**
Production **ALI N' PRODUCTIONS & LES FILMS DU NOUVEAU MONDE**
Co-production **UNITE DE PRODUCTION & AD VITAM**
Producers **NABIL AYOUC, AMINE BENJELLOUN, BRUNO NAHON & ALEXANDRA HENOCHSBERG**