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Official Selection

THE MAN WHO SOLD HIS SKIN

A FILM BY
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PRESENT



THE MAN WHO SOLD HIS SKIN

A FILM BY

Kaouther BEN HANIA

100 min – Tunisia, France, Belgium, Sweden, Germany - 2020

#Biennalecinema2020

#Venezia77

SYNOPSIS

Sam Ali, a young sensitive and impulsive Syrian, left his country for Lebanon to escape the war.

To be able to travel to Europe and live with the love of his life, he accepts to have his back tattooed by one of by the World's most sulfurous contemporary artist.

Turning his own body into a prestigious piece of art, Sam will however come to realize that his decision might actually mean anything but freedom.



KAOUTHER BEN HANIA

INTERVIEW

What was the origin of *The Man Who Sold His Skin*?

The idea for *The Man Who Sold His Skin* began germinating in my head in 2012. I was at the Louvre in Paris which at the time was devoting a retrospective to Belgium artist Wim Delvoye. There I saw, in Napoleon III Apartments, Delvoye's *Tim*, (2006 – 08) in which the artist had tattooed the back of Tim Steiner, who was sitting on an armchair with his shirt off displaying Delvoye's design.

From that moment, this singular and transgressive image has not left me. Little by little, other elements of my experience, the burning actuality and unforeseen encounters had added to and enriched this image. Once all of these elements came together, the story felt ready and compelled me to write it down. One day in 2014, when I was about to edit the nth version of the screenplay for my previous film *Beauty and the Dogs*, I found myself writing non-stop for five days, the story of *The Man Who Sold His Skin*.

After the release of *Beauty and the Dogs* in 2017, I looked at that first draft and started to rework it, to chisel it until I had a solid version. So, the script of *The Man Who Sold His Skin* was a long process that began with an image and resulted in a rich story.

Can you explain how you came up with the concept of bringing refugees into the art world?

This film is a meeting between two worlds that captivate me: the world of contemporary art and the world of refugees: two sealed worlds which are governed by entirely different codes. On the one hand, we have an established elitist world where freedom is the keyword, and on the other hand, we have a world of survival impacted by current events where the absence of choice is the daily concern of refugees.

The contrast between these two worlds in the film shows a reflection on freedom. When the refugee Sam meets the artist Jeffrey, he tells him, "You were born on the right side of the world."

The problem is we live in a world where people are not equal. Despite all the talk about equality and human rights, the increasingly complex historical and geopolitical contexts ensure there are inevitably two kinds of people: the privileged and the damned.

The film is a Faustian pact between the privileged and the damned. Sam Ali agrees to sell his back to the devil because he has no choice, and thus he enters the elitist and hyper-coded sphere of contemporary art through an unlikely door. His seemingly naive and uneducated gaze presents this world to us from a different angle than the one usually shown by the cultural establishment.

For someone as proud and upright as Sam, becoming an object can drive you crazy. He is exposed, sold, pushed from one side to another. Confronted with an exceptional fate, in the grip of a heartbreaking internal conflict, Sam Ali will try to regain his dignity and his freedom.

How did you choose your actors?

Sam Ali is a sensitive, impulsive, genuine and whole character, "rough on the edges" we might say. He is a lively, flayed man who defends himself with a strong sense of irony and dark humor. To play Sam, I needed a solid actor who had the art of moving from one register to another with ease — an actor with a wide emotional palette. The casting took a long time, but when I saw Yahya Mahayni's audition, I immediately recognized him as a rough diamond. An actor capable of carrying the film on his back!

The actress Dea Liane has appeared in a lot of theatre. She has this rigor and this capacity for work specific to high-level actresses. She stood out from the crowd. Playing Abeer was Dea's first movie role, and it was a real pleasure to direct her, to film her. Abeer is a young girl from a good family, a little bourgeois, who expresses the very kind side of a girl who obeys her parents, and who doesn't want to take risks. A girl who needs a shake to get her out of her comfort zone.

I personally adore Monica Bellucci, and I wanted to work with her. I sent her the script, and she loved the role. Soraya is a woman who expresses that haughty and snobbish side that is sometimes seen in people who are settled in their jobs and are self-confident, people who master the codes.

Monica is not at all like Soraya in life. She is an extraordinarily humble and sensitive person, but she knows the art world well and she immediately understood the character of Soraya. I remember she called me during the preparation to tell me: "we need to see each other, I have a clear idea of what Soraya looks like". I went to the meeting with fear because I am always afraid of actors who unilaterally decide how their characters should appear. I had my own clear idea of what Soraya would look like



and took some hairstyle and costume photos with me that that I had imagined for the character. Monica laid out her vision, and it exactly matched the images I had! We were on the same page from the beginning.

With the character of Jeffrey Godefroy, I wanted to shatter this romantic and has-been idea of the artist as a tortured, marginal being who suffers from his demons that we see a lot in cinema. He is a charismatic, self-confident character who knows the inner workings of the art market and goes as far as throwing a stone in the pond with a provocative work. He is the figure of the creative entrepreneur. Our Belgian co-producer sent me a demo of Koen de Bouw, and it was just Jeffrey! He is a formidable actor with unparalleled charisma.

When he declaims his lines, with the tone of his voice and the charisma he expresses, he puts everyone in his grip. He's got that bewitching thing that smart and powerful men have.

The film brings together many different genres: drama, tragedy, satire, romance, dark humor. How did you manage to mix these different elements?

For me, making a film is like creating a sheet of music. When you write a score, you can't have the same key or tone throughout the piece; otherwise, boredom is guaranteed.

Making a movie is exactly the same. It's a series of emotional variations that we share with the audience. This variation on the theme comes mainly from the emotional



journey of the main character. The psychological state of the protagonist dictates each scene. Sam Ali is in love, hence the romance, he undergoes a drama (that of becoming a refugee) and finds himself in a paradoxical world which is a satire, he responds and defends himself with a sense of irony from which black humor derives.

To create each scene, I ask myself this question: what does the character feel at this point in his life? Then I build the scene – its light, its decor, its costumes, its actions and dialogue, its music – to let this emotion shine through.

Moreover, the work that I did with my composer, even before the shooting, reflects this dynamic, accompanies it and supports it.

The film is visually vibrant and beautiful. How did you get this result?

Writing this film immersed me in the history of art and especially in the representation of the human body in painting. I collected an arsenal of images, photos and paintings that could nourish the visual universe of the film. I also storyboarded the majority of the scenes based on the sets selected. At the end of this design work, I met Christopher Aoun, my cinematographer, with whom I spent days and nights discussing every scene, every frame, every tone and the colors of the film. Nothing was left to chance. It was an enchanting brainstorming. With Christopher's creativity, his involvement and his sense of perfectionism, he was able to find technical solutions to magnify everything and go beyond my expectations. It was an enchanting brainstorming. With Christopher's creativity, his involvement and his sense of perfectionism, he was able to find technical solutions to magnify everything and go beyond my expectations.

After your 2014 documentary *Challat of Tunis* and let's not forget *Beauty and the Dogs* awarded at the Cannes Film Festival in 2017 plus a huge success all over the world, what advice can you give to other female directors to try to obtain the same level of success? What is your secret?

There are no secrets! It's a very tough job, but yet oh-so-exciting. A film is like a high-level marathon, it takes years of your life and you can't prepare it the day before. It takes discipline and a lot of work. You have to research, read, learn and be deeply interested in the human soul, history, literature, philosophy and the current political context. You have to forge a vision of the world to then be able to say something interesting. This observation is valid for men as well as for women who want to do this job.

But I'm not naive about the expectations one can have of a director, a woman coming from the South like me. In fact, the first feedback I had on *The Man Who Sold His Skin* was just this sentence that kept coming back: "It's unexpected"!

Talking about the refugees in Europe or the contemporary art in a visual allegory full of colors was unusual for my Tunisian Director profile. Being a screenwriter, a director also means having the ability to think outside the box of your own identity. During the process of writing and directing this film, I myself had to become a Syrian refugee, a contemporary artist, an internationally renowned gallery owner, a young girl trapped in marriage.

Only this otherness, this desire to explore allowed me to go towards something unexpected.





KAOUTHER BEN HANIA

SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Tunisian director Kaouther Ben Hania studied cinema in Tunisia and then in Paris - Femis and la Sorbonne. Her previous film *Beauty and the Dogs*, premiered at Cannes Film Festival official selection "Un Certain Regard" in 2017, won the Best Sound Creation Award and was distributed in many countries.

Challat of Tunis, her first feature, opened the ACID section at Cannes Film Festival 2014 and was widely distributed.

Her second documentary *Zineb hates the Snow* premiered at Locarno Film Festival 2016 and won several awards.

Imams go to School, her first documentary premiered at IDFA 2010. She also directed several shorts, including *Wooden Hand*, (2013) and *Sheikh's watermelons* (2018) which had a long and successful run on the international festival circuit.

The Man Who Sold His Skin is her latest feature film.

PRODUCTION TEAM

Producers NADIM CHEIKHROUHA, HABIB ATTIA, ANNABELLA NEZRI, THANASSIS KARATHANOS, MARTIN HAMPEL, ANDREAS ROCKSEN

Associate producers GUILLAUME RAMBOURG, LASSAAD & RAFIK KILANI, SIMON OFENLOCH, DANIEL ZISKIND

Co-producers FAYÇAL HASSAÏRI (METAFORA), ANTOINE KHALIFE (A.R.T.), ANTHONY MUIR (FILM I VÄST), PHILIPPE LOGIE (VOO-BE TV), PHILIPPE FAUCON (ISTIQLAL FILMS)

Line producers JACQUES REBOUD, KHALED W. BARSAOUI, MARIE-SOPHIE VOLKENNER

CAST

Sam Ali
Abeer
Jeffrey Godefroi
Soraya Waldy
Ziad
Sam’s mother
Hazem
William
Marc Sheen
Sam’s Sister
Adel Saadi
Museum guard
Syrian Policeman
Syrian Policeman
Curator
Insurer

YAHYA MAHAYNI
DEA LIANE
KOEN DE BOUW
MONICA BELLUCCI
SAAD LOSTAN
DARINA AL JOUNDI
JAN DAHDOUH
CHRISTIAN VADIM
MARC DE PANDA
NAJOUA ZOUHAIR
HUSAM CHADAT
NADIM CHEIKHROUHA
RÉMI SARMINI
MOULDI KRIDEN
RUPERT WYNNE-JAMES
WIM DELVOYE

CREW

Writer & Director
Music Composer
Director of Photography
Camera
1st assistant director
Set designer
Editor
Sound designer
Re-recording mixer
Continuity
Costume designer
Make up & Hairdresser
Make-up effects

KAOUTHER BEN HANIA
AMINE BOUHAFI
CHRISTOPHER AOUN
NESTOR SALAZAR
MARIE FISCHER
SOPHIE ABDELKEFI
MARIE-HÉLÈNE DOZO
ANDERS BILLING VIVE
LENY ANDRIEUX
KHADIJA BABAI-BOUASSIDA
RANDA KHEDHER
MARYLINE SCARSELLI
FLORENCE DEPESTELE

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