

ALI N' PRODUCTIONS, LES FILMS DU NOUVEAU MONDE

present



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2024 OFFICIAL SELECTION
CANNES PREMIERE

EVERYBODY LOVES TOUDA

A FILM BY NABIL AYOUC

WITH NISRIN ERRADI,
JOURD CHAMHIY, JALILA TALEMSI

2024 – FRANCE, MOROCCO, BELGIUM, DENMARK, NETHERLANDS – DRAMA – ARABIC – 101'

mk2
FILMS

SYNOPSIS

Irrepressible Touda only dreams of one thing: being a Sheikha, a respected traditional Moroccan performer empowered by the lyrics of the fierce female poets who came before her - with their songs of resistance and emancipation.

Performing every evening in provincial bars under the lustful gaze of men, Touda plans to set her sights on leaving her small village for the bright lights of Casablanca where she hopes to be recognized as a true artist and also secure a better future for her and her son.

INTERVIEW WITH NABIL AYOUC

You paint the portrait of a woman of today, determined, bold, passionate, and illiterate all at the same time. Did she exist?

Touda is the successor of the heroines in rebellion against all established powers, the Sheikhs. Their voice was their weapon and their style of singing, the Aita, their ammunition. That's who Touda is. She wants to transcend borders and prohibitions; she fights all forms of contemporary dominations. The film is driven by this spirit of rebellion.

The Aita is a Moroccan style of music. How would you define it?

The Aita is a form of vocal poetry, born several centuries ago, in the plains of Morocco. It was originally sung by men because in those days women were forbidden to sing. At the beginning they were the members of a tribe who in the evening would get together and write stories about their region, their struggles, what they were going through... There is an epic dimension to these sung tales that travelled the country from one valley to the other until they formed a Aita. In the nineteenth century, a courageous woman, Kharboucha, decided to break the taboos and for the first time sang in public. This woman became famous because she confronted a Qaid, a lord of phenomenal power who had fallen in love with her. She resisted him and the legend has it that he had her immured alive.... Thus, thanks to her, this art has become feminine. These women, later called Sheikhs, enriched their repertoire by evoking in their songs subversive subjects for the time, such as desire, the body and love. Their outspokenness and the freedom they allowed themselves quickly gave them a special status, strong, determined, avant-garde. They first sang in villages, then they got around, and the Aita travelled with them from the plains to the Atlas Mountains.

How are these Sheikhs perceived in Morocco?

The Sheikhs (feminine of Sheik) were adulated and admired by the entire Moroccan people. They embodied Morocco's soul, its voice, because they were part of every struggle. In the 60s and 70s the countryside was poor and many Sheikhs had to move to the cities to earn a living. There, they were forced to change their repertoire in order to survive, responding to the desires of the public and singing in cabarets. But seeing women performing in disreputable places, putting on a show and drinking alcohol was enough to associate most of them with prostitutes. Little by little their image deteriorated. From the status of being adored, they became despised by people for whom the very word "Sheika" had become an insult, even if today their relationship with the population remains complex, this is a kind of love-hate relationship. They have to fight for their art to be understood. They can be called to perform as MCs at parties, weddings, there are some Sheikhs who become successful and gain status

but their respectability in the eyes of one part of the population is always questioned....It saddens and hurts me. I wanted to restore these artists to their former glory. This is Touda's driving force in the film, to restore a status and defend a tradition.

Your film is disconcerting because it is constantly on edge, like walking a tightrope, painting the portrait of this young woman who sings...

Sheikhats have been a part of my films for a long time because I have always found them compelling, touching, and I wanted them one day to be at the centre of one of my stories. I have always admired strong women, probably because I grew up with a strong mother. These women have always fascinated me. I always knew I wanted to give them a voice. I have met many, especially for this film. They told me about all the paradoxes, all the heartbreaks they go through: the power they ensconce themselves to establish a space and, in some way, take power – because men literally go crazy for them – and at the same time the way in which they are permanently dominated, crushed by a patriarchal society that would like to dictate their repertoire and lock them into a world that makes them a commodity. That's what interests me, how to resist this modern world that want to tame them. The Aita is first and foremost a resistance song.

At the beginning we witness a party scene that goes wrong. Was the story supposed to open by this party that turns into a nightmare?

That's how their lives are. I was nourished by the slices of lives that these women told me, stories that sometimes left me speechless. It is harsh, but it's a reality. "It's our daily lives" the Sheikha who dances with Touda at the beginning of the film told me, when I was casting and warned her of the next scene. These women live permanently with this violence, they are alone and above all destitute, but they have a form of resilience that gets them through. An extraordinary resilience...I wanted this opening scene to embody the banal descent into horror. I also wanted to show the brutality of some experiences they live with and how they're forced to move on the next day. Because they have no other option. So yes, starting with the beauty of a song then sink into the cruelty that also constitutes the lives of these women seemed important to me, to sink into their reality right away, without warning.

The male figures are not all benevolent...

But some are. It's not all black and white in this nightlife world. There are men who protect and love these women. In Touda's life, there is her son, Yassine, who is everything to her. There also is this old violinist, whose name we will never know, who seeks to accompany her

in her dream to rise to the top. And there is her father, an unusual character who supports her in the face of general public disgrace, and her own brother's rejection.

Touda's young son belongs to the world of silence. He is deaf-mute...

Touda wouldn't have the strength she has without Yassine. One could say that she sings to give voice to her little boy's aspirations. He can't hear what her mother sings, but he can perceive it and he is in total awe of her. Their relationship transcends words. Everything she does is for him, to give him a place, to offer him what she didn't have, starting with education. She is obsessed with finding him a school, she, who is illiterate.

The epilogue is unexpected, ambivalent even.

The end is ambivalent, it's true, it makes it more intense in my opinion. On the one hand Touda realises that she was wrong to believe that she could make it, that in the slums just as much as among the wealthy, the power of men and their money remains the strongest. On the other hand, she says no. She rebels by leaving the hotel, her head held high. But she doesn't give up on her dreams. The descent of the elevator is long and complex because it follows all the states Touda goes through. She doesn't necessarily put an end to her ambition, but she refuses to compromise, to accept that we make of her what she is not. From the moment she leaves the stage, which she thought was that of "her big night", she is confronted with reality and disillusionment. Something collapses around her. It's the end of a dream but it is also the beginning of a new realm of possibility. Everything she has been through since the beginning of the film we see flash up on her face, in a heart rendering way, very organic, carried by Nisrin Erradi's breath-taking performance. It's both her guts and her soul we receive with full strength.

The whole scene is filmed in one sequence shot...

Nearly eighteen minutes long, during which we go from the discovery of a new world to her rejection, from hope to disillusionment. A whole shot starting in a street, that takes us through a hotel lobby, go up 37 floors, sweeping through dressing rooms, an audience, following Touda performing on stage, until she flees, her descent in the same elevator...I wasn't particularly looking for a technical feat but in this case, the only way for me to film this scene, was that there shouldn't be any breaks, and always be as close as possible to her. With my whole team we prepared this shot for 3 months. We went back and forth to the hotel, the highest building in Casablanca, dozens of times. We thought these images through and through, all the sequences, we did all kinds of technical tests, in particular to change the elevator cabin, which was too small, to use different stairs, until we found the path allowing us to build this shot. It really was a phenomenal challenge. I'll spare you the details but at one stage of shooting it

there were more than 250 people present that night, and I started to think I was insane to even think it was possible to shoot this in a one sequence shot. It was quite simply utopic. Then, at 6am, possibly through the magic of exhaustion and a general feeling of “last chance”, a miracle happened. It started raining outside, in the street, and something fell naturally into place, almost by magic, when I thought it was doomed.

Was the rain like a sign?

In Morocco, rain has great significance. The country lives to the rhythm of the beneficial rain, a sign of something positive since we have a permanent water deficit. We spend our time waiting for the rain. It is like the impetus that gives hope to an entire country.

Women’s emancipation, rebellion, struggle...Touda’s challenge is formidable...

I wanted to make a film about belief, about emancipation and transcendence. As soon as Touda sings, she’s in a trance, carried by a connection to the sacred intimately linked to the Aita. The faith she has in her art is unshakable and nothing can make her surrender. She is not religious but embodies a form of mysticism. Moreover, when she is sitting on her bed, her singing merges with the “sacred”, the call to prayer. She gives a voice to that call, a call which moreover is traditionally proclaimed by men. In this way she transforms the proscribed in a moment of grace, and it is this grace that holds and supports her. She couldn’t do what she does, she couldn’t fight this way for herself and for her son if she wasn’t carried by this grace, this deep belief in her art. She is a modern-day heroine.

Do you feel close to Touda?

I feel very close to her. First for what she stands for, and because she is a solitary person, and I like solitude, it built me. In her relationship with her son too I feel close to her. I grew up watching my mother struggle in Sarcelles, on the outskirts of Paris where we lived. She too sang and for a long time I kept tapes of her singing. It was her release mechanism; art has always been her way of existing. And I didn’t speak much. I preferred to shut myself up in my own little world and observe, listen.

Does Nisrin Erradi, the actress who plays Touda have star status in Morocco?

Nisrin is well known in Morocco. She was discovered abroad in *Adam*, Maryam Touzani’s first film, for which she was nominated for one of the Césars Revelations. Nisrin is a phenomenally powerful actress. She is fiery and intense; you can sense her inwardness yet she’s also capable of occupying all the space offered to her on stage. She worked a tremendous amount for this

film. She trained with professional Sheikhs for a year and a half. She learned to sing, to keep up the rhythm, play percussions, dance, move and speak like they do, everything that nourished her role. Even though the film was shot in several stages, she turned down all the offers she got in between to devote herself entirely to Touda. She was truly inhabited by her part. To this day, she tells me that she doesn't know how to get out of the character.

Your shots are magnificent and bright. You are like a painter who looks at his country and its contemporaries carefully.

I have been working for a long time with Virginie Surdej, great Director of Photography, my most beautiful cinema encounter. With her and the camera operator, Adil Ayoub, it's always very stimulating to see how a text and an image bond, how we are going to transpose a character's journey onto the screen. We tried to draw each shot and thought of Touda's place in nature, because my film constantly oscillates between the beautiful and the ugly. The beautiful being her son, her singing, the ugly being money, men who want to degrade her, the night. Everything in the film is contrasts, paradoxes even.

There is a lot of music, of course, but you pace the singing scenes with a constant concern for dramaturgy. How did you find the right rhythm?

It is a musical film, conceived as such. Music plays an important part to the point of becoming narrative, whether it's the Aïta or popular music that Touda sings in cabarets, because the lyrics have a meaning. I wanted a musical counterpoint to the songs though, and for that I called on a Danish composer, Flemming Nordkrog, who lives in Paris, and showed infinite delicacy in his compositions. I wanted the score to take us somewhere else, somewhere intimate, to make sure that Touda's journey is not only geographical but above all an inner journey. That is what Flemming's music allows. As for the traditional music, I worked on it well before filming with Mohammed Manjra, a Moroccan producer, who did a colossal job revisiting the repertoire and make brilliant arrangements.

Is the film similar to the screenplay you wrote with your wife, Maryam Touzani, also a director?

Of course... yes, and no! What is really wonderful about making a film is to let yourself be surprised by the characters and especially by the actors. The story hasn't changed but I allowed myself to navigate on several paths, always talking about it with Maryam...Working with her is a constant joy. Her gaze, full of decency and tenderness is precious to me. It is so special....Maryam is an exceptional human being who always invites me to question in every possible way what I want to express. I accept and love my part of femininity, it has also been nourished by the gaze Maryam has of these women.

How long did the shooting take?

A year and a half, over four seasons. I shot in several stages. We started in October 2022 and finished in April 2023. I wanted to film the changes in nature, the changing colours, the evolving landscapes, I wanted that to be perceptible on the screen without being too present. I wanted this journey through the seasons, through the country, to also be the expression of Touda's inner journey.

Is Moroccan society ready for #Metoo demands?

Moroccan society is divided between progressives who want laws to move forward, review the family code and the place of women – a commission has just handed their report to the king about that – and the conservatives, who reject any progress and any emancipation of women. Their resistance is expressed in different ways, including in violent ways. It is a struggle.

Are you worried that the film would suffer the same fate in Morocco as MUCH LOVED?

It is difficult to anticipate the reactions this film will set off....I don't think about it. I try to focus on what I want to say about my characters, these transgressive fighters who seek independence, these lone warriors, like Touda.

Are you still in charge of the cultural centre you created in Sidi Moumen, in the suburbs of Casablanca, which we see in CASABLANCA BEATS?

Yes, and this centre is part of a foundation – the Ali Zaoua Foundation – named after my second film, which I created in 2009 with a friend, enabling us to open several cultural centres across Morocco. With the teams we have created five others, since the one in Sidi Moumen, in several cities' difficult neighbourhoods, as well as a training academy for cultural professions. These centres are agoras for young people, islands of greenery similar to the Youth Centre in Sarcelles that I frequented as a child, and which helped me find my path. The young Moroccans who frequent them attend dance, singing, visual arts, theatre classes, they view films, they debate, and learn how to build their own stories. They are windows on to the world, of other realities, places where these young people discover different ways to express what they feel in complete freedom....I'm very happy because when we started there were a majority of boys and very few girls, and now it's the other way around...I'm a great believer in the power of arts and culture to transform the world. In fact, that's all I believe in.

ABOUT NABIL AYOUC

Nabil Ayouch is a member of the Academy of Motion Pictures, the Cesar Academy, and a founding member of the Arab Film Academy.

His first short film *LES PIERRES BLEUES DU DESERT* (1992) revealed Jamel Debbouze. After two other short films Nabil Ayouch directed his first feature film *MEKTOUB* (1997) which like *ALI ZAOUA : PRINCE OF THE STREETS* (2000) represented Morocco at the Oscars. This was followed by *A MINUTE OF SUN LESS* (2003) and *WHATEVER LOLA WANTS* (2008) produced by Pathé.

After directing several live shows such as the opening of Le Temps du Maroc in France at the Palace of Versailles in 1999, he designed and directed the closing show of the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2009.

In 2011, he shot his first feature-length documentary *MY LAND* in the Middle East. In 2012 he directed *HORSES OF GOD*, inspired by the May 2003 attacks in Casablanca, nominated for a Certain Regard Award and Winner of François Chalais Award in Cannes. It represented Morocco at the Golden Globes and the Oscars, received 26 awards on the international circuit.

In May 2015, his next film *MUCH LOVED* was selected for the Directors' Fortnight at Cannes Film Festival. In September the film was awarded the Valois d'Or and the Valois for Best Actress in Angoulême. Banned in Morocco, distributed in France by Pyramide and by Celluloid Dreams internationally, *MUCH LOVED* was released in twenty countries and was acquired by Netflix for the US and several countries.

It was awarded 12 international prizes and reached 280.000 admissions at the box office.

In 2016 Nabil Ayouch directed *RAZZIA*. The film which had its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2017 was nominated for a Platform Prize. It won a dozen international awards. It was sold around the world, notably in the US where it is distributed by Amazon. In France, it was distributed by Ad Vitam, and reached 175.000 admissions at the box office.

In 2019, Nabil Ayouch produced the film *ADAM* directed by Maryam Touzani, which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival (Un Certain Regard). The film, sold in 20 countries, has won 23 awards to date and has seen both public and critical success. In France, it was distributed by Ad Vitam and reached 92,000 admissions.

In 2021, Nabil Ayouch directed *CASABLANCA BEATS*. The film, which explores the youth of the peripheral neighborhoods of Casablanca and Hip Hop as a means of expression, premiered in the Official Competition of the 2021 Cannes Film Festival, a first for a Moroccan film.

In 2023, he produced the film *THE BLUE CAFTAN* by Maryam Touzani. Selected at the Cannes Film Festival in the Un Certain Regard section, the film won the FRIPESCI Prize of the International Critics. Representing Morocco at the Oscars, the film was shortlisted among the top 15 foreign films, a first in Moroccan history. It subsequently won over 50 awards

worldwide. Sold in around thirty territories, it garnered over 500,000 admissions, a record for a Moroccan film worldwide.

In 2024, Nabil Ayouch directed *EVERYBODY LOVES TOUDA*. The film is presented at the 77th edition of the Cannes Film Festival, in Official Selection (Cannes Premiere).

Beyond his films, Nabil Ayouch has been actively involved in revitalizing the Moroccan film landscape through Ali n' Productions, which he founded in 1999, by supporting young talents through various initiatives. This began with the Mohamed Reggab Prize, a screenplay competition that led to the production of 8 short films in 35 mm between 2000 and 2003. He further contributed to the industry by creating the "Film Industry," producing 40 genre films between 2005 and 2010, thus fostering the development of a genuine film industry that nurtured and trained talents in all aspects of the cinematic field.

In 2006, he initiated the Meda Films Development program - with the support of the European Union and the International Film Festival Foundation of Marrakech - to provide guidance to producers and screenwriters from the ten countries of the Southern Mediterranean during the development phase of their films.

Highly active in the socio-cultural sphere, Nabil Ayouch established the Ali Zaoua Foundation in 2014, where he serves as president, and opened the Cultural Center "Les étoiles de Sidi Moumen" aimed at the youth in the peripheral district of Sidi Moumen, the birthplace of the suicide bombers responsible for the May 16, 2003 attacks in Casablanca that inspired *HORSES OF GOD*. To date, over 1000 children and teenagers have enrolled, learning various forms of artistic expression. This was followed by the establishment of a second Cultural Center in Tangier in 2016, a third in Agadir in 2019, a fourth in Fes in 2020, and finally a fifth center in Marrakech in 2021.

In November 2014, the Louvre Museum paid tribute to Nabil Ayouch by granting him a three-day carte blanche during which a significant portion of his work was showcased to the Parisian public. In 2015, he exhibited a series of photos in Paris and Casablanca exploring the marginalized aspects of society that haunt him and permeate his artistic work. In 2022, he presented a second series of photos titled "Aporia," which was exhibited in Casablanca.

NABIL AYOUC FILMOGRAPHY

2024 EVERYBODY LOVES TOUDA

Feature-length fiction film. Official Selection Cannes Film Festival 2024 (Cannes Premiere)

2022 Produced THE BLUE CAFTAN, by MARYAM TOUZANI

Feature-length fiction film. Selected at Cannes (Un Certain Regard). Winner of over 50 awards in film festivals. Highest box office record in the history of Morocco (500.000 admissions worldwide)

2021 CASABLANCA BEATS

Feature-length fiction film. Official Competition Cannes Film Festival 2021

2019 Produced ADAM, by MARYAM TOUZANI

Feature-length fiction film. Official Selection Cannes Film Festival 2019 (Un Certain Regard) 92.000 admissions at French box office.

2017 RAZZIA

Feature-length fiction film. Official Selection at Toronto International Film Festival and chosen as Morocco's Oscar entry for Academy Awards. 175.000 admissions at French box office.

2015 MUCH LOVED

Feature-length fiction film. Selected at Director's Fortnight at Cannes Film Festival. Valois d'Or for Best Film and Valois for Best Actress in Angoulême. Lumière Award for Best Foreign Film. Highest French box office record for a Moroccan film.

2012 HORSES OF GOD

Feature-length fiction film. 23 International Awards. Official Selection Cannes 2012 (Un Certain Regard). Morocco's Oscar entry for Academy awards. Best Foreign Film Lumière Award.

2011 MY LAND

Feature-length documentary. Best Original Score and Best Editing Awards Tangier Film Festival 2011. Best Documentary Tetouan Mediterranean Film Festival 2012. People's Choice Award Cinéma Festival Nice. Press Award Femeck Arab Film Festival. Official Selection at several festivals in France, Morocco, USA, etc.

2007 WHATEVER LOLA WANTS

Feature-length fiction film. Sold to 33 countries. Best Film Award National Moroccan Film Festival (2008) Selected at Tribeca, Dubai, Marrakesh, New Delhi, FESPACO.

2003 A MINUTE OF SUN LESS (TV)

Feature-length film, "Masculin/Feminin" collection for Arte. Montpellier Mediterranean Film Festival Technical Industries Award.

2000 ALI ZAOUA: PRINCE OF THE STREETS

Feature-length fiction film. Morocco's Oscar entry for Academy awards 2001. Sold in 28 countries. Classified as « 1001 films you must see before you die » written by leading international critics. Awarded 44 times in various international film festivals.

1997 MEKTOUB

First feature-length fiction film. Morocco's Oscar entry for Academy Awards 1998. Best Arab Film and Best First Film Awards at Cairo International Film Festival. Special Jury Award Oslo. Selected at about thirty International Film Festivals (Berlin, Rotterdam, Gant, etc.)

1991 VENDEUR DE SILENCE (short)

With Pascal Demolon. Best Director Award Tangier National Film Festival. Selected at several international film festivals.

1992 LES PIERRES BLEUES DU DESERT (short)

With Jamel Debouzze. Selected at about twenty world festivals. Canal+ Award at Bastia Mediterranean Film Festival (France) Broadcasted on Canal+, RTM, Canal Horizon, 2M, France 2 and Paris Première.

CAST

Touda	Nisrin ERRADI
Yassine	Joud CHAMIHY
Rkia	Jalila TLEMSI
Violonist	El Moustafa BOUTANKITE
Lover	Lahcen RAZZOUGUI

CREW

Director	Nabil AYOUC
Screenplay	Nabil AYOUC
in collaboration with	Maryam TOUZANI
1st Assistant Director	Christele AGNELLO
Script Supervisor	Leenda MAMOSA
Director of Photography	Virginie SURDEJ
Costume Designer	Rafika BENMIMOUN
Head Makeup Artist	Jennifer COUROUGE
Production Designer	Eve MARTIN
in collaboration with	Samir ISSOUM
Editor	Nicolas RUMPL
in collaboration with	Yassir HAMANI
Sound Mixer	Samuel AICHOUN
Original Music	Flemming NORDKROG
in collaboration with	Kristian SELIN EIDNES ANDERSEN
Productions	ALI N' PRODUCTIONS / LES FILMS DU NOUVEAU MONDE / VELVET FILMS / SNOWGLOBE / VIKING FILM / STAER
Producers	Nabil AYOUC, Amine BENJELLOUN, Sebastian SCHELENZ, Katrín PORS, Mikkel JERSIN, Eva JAKOBSEN, Marleen SLOT, Elisa Fernanda PIRIR
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