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PERSMAP

LUBNA
AZABAL

SALEH
BAKRI

AYOUB
MISSIOUI



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
UN CERTAIN REGARD
2022 OFFICIAL SELECTION

THE BLUE CAFTAN

A FILM BY
MARYAM TOUZANI

FILMS *Boutique*

THE BLUE CAFTAN

EEN FILM VAN MARYAM TOUZANI



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Drama - 2022 - MAR - 118 minuten

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SYNOPSIS

In *THE BLUE CAFTAN* toont regisseur Maryam Touzani (*ADAM*) dat liefde verschillende vormen kan aannemen. De fenomenale acteerprestaties van Saleh Bakri en de Belgische Lubna Azabal (*INCENDIES*, *ADAM*) zorgen samen met de prachtige cinematografie voor een aangrijpende, warme en universele film.

Halim (Saleh Bakri) heeft samen met zijn vrouw Mina (Lubna Azabal) een traditionele kaftanwinkel in de medina van Salé, Marokko. Zijn authentieke handwerk levert schitterende kaftans op. Hun hele huwelijk lang leven ze al met een geheim, maar desondanks heeft het echtpaar een enorme genegenheid voor elkaar. Mina's ziekte en de komst van Youssef, een nieuwe leerling die het vak wil leren, zorgen er voor dat dit fragiele evenwicht onder druk komt te staan. Verenigd in hun liefde, helpen ze elkaar om hun angsten onder ogen te zien.

THE BLUE CAFTAN is geselecteerd voor het IFFR 2023. In Cannes werd de film met een staande ovatie ontvangen en won hij de FIPRESCI-prijs in het Un Certain Regard-programma.



MARYAM TOUZANI

Born in Tangier, Morocco, in 1980, Maryam Touzani spends her childhood in her native city before pursuing a university degree in journalism in London. Passionate about writing, she moves back to her country after her studies and works as a journalist, specializing in North African cinema. Soon, she feels the urge to express herself through her own films.

In 2008, she writes and directs a documentary for the first national women's day in Morocco, an important date for the country, followed by a number of other documentaries. *WHEN THEY SLEPT* (2012), her first short fiction, travels around the world through prestigious festivals, winning a total of seventeen awards.

In 2015, her second short fiction, *AYA GOES TO THE BEACH* continues on the same path, winning fifteen awards worldwide. Through film director Nabil Ayouch's greatly acclaimed *MUCH LOVED* (2015), which opens at the Director's Fortnight at the Cannes Film Festival, she takes her experience further, working on the development of the script and participating on the film set at various levels, closely working with the director and actresses. Soon after, she co-writes with Nabil Ayouch his latest feature, *RAZZIA*, which premieres at The Toronto International Film Festival on Platform and represents Morocco at the Academy Awards. In *RAZZIA*, in which she also plays the part of Salima, one of the main characters, she finds herself on the other side of the camera for the first time.

ADAM marks Maryam Touzani's feature film directing debut, and after premiering in Cannes Film Festival in the Un Certain Regard competition, the film screened at TIFF, GFF, RIFF and obtained 30 awards around the world, and sold in over 20 countries.

In 2019, Maryam Touzani becomes a member of the Academy of Motion Pictures. That same year, *ADAM* was also Morocco's Official Selection for the Oscars 2020 race in the best Foreign Film Category, and also represented Morocco in the Golden Globes.

In 2022, Maryam Touzani returns to the Cannes Film Festival with her second feature *THE BLUE CAFTAN* selected at Un Certain Regard section.



INTERVIEW WITH MARYAM TOUZANI

How did THE BLUE CAFTAN come about? Did it originate from your own experience or purely from your imagination?

I work a lot based on my feelings and inspiration; I don't intellectualize things when I write. While I was scouting for a location for my previous film, ADAM, I made a decisive encounter in the medina of Salé with a gentleman who ran a hair salon for women. He greatly inspired the character of Halim (Saleh Bakri). I felt that there was, in his life, the presence of something unsaid, something smothered with respect to who he truly was deep down, and who he tried to be in order to face the world, within a highly conservative environment. I found myself imagining his life, for I never dared to ask him any personal questions, as it would have been too private. However, I spent a lot of time with him and he left a deep impression on me. One day, the story took shape, and needed to be told; it was a story that had to be written down without thinking about it too logically or rationally. Writing in of itself is a journey, and I was lucky to have Nabil's perspective; he shares my life, but we also share a passion. Through his gaze, which is always kind, sharp and sentient, I was thus able to be confronted with myself, to receive support for my characters' and my story's development, to delve even deeper into things...

Why did the hairdresser become a maalem, a caftan master tailor, in your film?

I have an old caftan, which used to belong to my mother and has always fascinated me. When I was a little girl, I thought this caftan was magnificent, and I would tell myself that one day I would be able to wear it. Years went by and then, one day, I did wear it and I realized how precious such things are, as they can be passed down from one generation to the next and tell a story. The story of the person who crafted them, spending days or perhaps even months making them, as if part of the craftsman soul left its mark on it, for it to then take in the essence of the person who will wear it. The caftan thus found its place in the film's narrative. I genuinely love the craftsmanship of many professions which, sadly, are disappearing. There is something so beautiful in the traditions that we are losing, something that recounts who we are, that is part of our DNA. This is a part of tradition that must be preserved and protected whereas other traditions deserve to be questioned and shaken up. It touches me deeply to see activities such as that of caftan tailor die out, because we live in a society that is going too fast, that no longer grants these skills the time they require and no longer values them. I, on the contrary, like to take pause, observe, take the time, and this kind of craft provides me with profound inspiration. That is the reason why the hairdresser from Salé became a master tailor in my film.

Halim is in a couple with Mina (Lubna Azabal). Between them, there appears to be a certain latent tension, and Mina seems to be the dominating one in their relationship. Was your intent to show an unconventional couple?

Above all, I wanted to depict a woman who is trying to protect her husband and who, in so doing, becomes the dominant person in their couple. Next to her, Halim is fragile because, as he can sense there's something taboo about him, he is unable to face the world. He immerses himself body and soul into his work as a tailor out of passion, but also to protect himself from the outside world. His work provides a form of healing, the right to exist. He makes beautiful outfits that he can display in broad daylight, in a world he has learned to hide from. On the other hand, Mina is a strong woman. But she will come to realize that because of this strength she has contributed to making her husband even more vulnerable, out of love, although she only meant to protect him. Just like a mother who overprotects her child and becomes aware that one day she will no longer be there and the child will have to face the world, on their own. Their relationship has shifted over the years; Mina has also become a mother figure for Halim. They love each other, but differently; they have redefined their love.

Halim is extremely touching: he is very gentle, and exudes a strong interiority; he is the opposite of a virile and patriarchal figure.

He doesn't have the strength to face up to things; he is rather fragile that way, yet another form of strength is going to gradually rise within him. Therein lies the character's paradox, as there is a true strength to his gentleness, a strength that reveals itself in the course of the story – and

he'll also discover himself. At the end of the film, he finds the courage to face the world, to carry Mina through the streets of the medina while shattering the taboo of death in order to celebrate the woman he loves, in a society where no one ever detracts from these traditions.

At the beginning of the film, we think that the love between Mina and Halim has faded. Then there's a sequence where they go out one night, go to a café, have fun together, and we understand they still love each other. Was it important to have your characters evolve, to contradict what we think we understand at the beginning of the film?

I think we are more often than not shackled by stereotypes. There is a profound bond between Mina and Halim, and to understand that, you have to immerse yourself in this couple's life. They deeply love one another and always have; their bond has grown stronger over the years, which is something we discovered through details peppered throughout the film. I didn't want to show their love in a way that was too obvious at the onset; the viewer must share these characters' journey, follow them through the story, spend time with them, patiently observing them and getting a sense of their everyday lives. We sometimes think that everyday life is boring, but to me it isn't at all. Everyday life is the part of our existences that is the most filled with life. All this is woven into the fabric of our lives, the details, the exceptional moments – all this is found in the details of everyday life. You need to learn how to sense and see these things. This is the reason why I wanted to observe and film this couple, with their everyday gestures and movements that are going to lead them to something extraordinary.

Halim's apprentice, Youssef, suddenly appears into this couple's lives, eliciting desire for Halim and jealousy on Mina's part. However, Youssef gradually becomes a sort of third member of the family. Here again, things shift and evolve between the three characters and what it all comes down to in the end is love.

Love also encompasses the things we're ready to do for love, like Mina being ready to see that her husband would be happier if he could love and accept himself. Yes, Halim is gay; this is part of who he is, his struggles, his suffering, for he lives in a society that doesn't accept him. Yet, the core theme here is above all love. Mina will attempt to free Halim from his malaise, so that he can love and accept himself, so that he can stop living in shame. What could be more beautiful than being accepted as you are by the person that you love? The fact that it is Mina who understands, supports, and helps Halim is for me essential. Mina is a religious woman, a profound believer. Yes, Mina, Halim and Youssef form a love triangle. Youssef arrives in this shop, and although he is very young, he quickly understands that Mina is jealous – something about which he shows great maturity. He knows his place; he isn't intrusive, he watches, listens and soon understands this couple's fragility. And then little by little, he makes a place for himself, and ultimately it's thanks to Mina that the couple will gradually integrate him. She does understand that her husband is attracted to Youssef, as she could herself be attracted to him as a woman. They thus share something, and Mina progresses in a certain direction, little by little. She is dying, and the certainty of impending death enables her to ask herself essential questions with regard to, for instance, what you leave behind. Mina wants her legacy to be a man who loves himself and is happy. In order to do so, she must confront her fears, question her convictions, transcend herself. Mina supports her husband in this rebirth, and Halim supports her as death grows nearer.

Mina suffers from cancer. Is the disease a somatization or a symbol of the absence of sexuality in the couple?

Mina's sexual desolation obviously plagues her and transforms her. But her cancer isn't related to that. After a mastectomy, after putting up a fight, she chooses at some point to no longer receive treatment and prefers to let life decide. I think it's very beautiful to let life follow its course. We tend to believe that we have the upper hand on things, that we can control everything, but there are things that are well beyond us sometimes. I'm not saying you shouldn't fight, but I think that Mina understands at some point that the outcome will be the same, regardless of what she does. I wanted the disease to lead to a reflection on her part, and to her making a decision. I wanted her to take action when faced with the inevitable. I think it can be fortunate to be able to have this kind of awareness and question some of our choices, and perhaps sometimes fix certain things.

Is the fact that she accepts death related to the idea of mektoub – destiny?

Mina isn't a passive person; she has made the decision to no longer receive treatment, which is a conscious choice. Perhaps does it have something to do with the fact that she is a profound believer. Her faith is deep, but it's a faith she has redefined, and she draws strength from this spirituality. Indeed, from the standpoint of religion, Halim's sexual orientation is a sin, and this causes a conflict with her feelings because she loves him deeply. Her relation to faith goes beyond that which is written, beyond mektoub and conventions. From this faith, though, she draws the strength to make sure that her husband can live his life the way he really wishes he could.

The film's images are superb, extremely sensual. Can you tell us more about your work with Virginie Surdej, who was also your cinematographer for your previous film, ADAM?

I love working with Virginie, she's extraordinary as a human being, as a professional, and as an artist; working with her is always such a bliss. Indeed, she and I worked on the sensuality you mentioned, I wanted the film to have that sensory aspect. When Halim touches the fabric, I wanted the viewers to feel the touch of this fabric, to fully be in the details of tailoring. I wanted the audience to be immersed in this world, leading us to Halim's soul. Through his work, we understand who Halim is, his passion takes on a concrete form. This craftsmanship is dying and yet Halim is fighting in his own way to keep it alive. When Youssef arrives, Halim feels a glimmer of hope, sees a possible legacy. This is how their love starts – through the passing on of knowledge. Youssef is fascinated by the master tailor, and this is something that is becoming increasingly rare because young people tend to prefer jobs with which you can earn money more easily, and faster. Youssef's love for Halim the "master craftsman" is going to turn into a true love of the man himself. With Virginie, we wanted to put the spotlight on the maalems' work, show the beauty in the details. The light seeps into various places, helping us delve into the depths the characters' emotions. Virginie is very receptive to the characters, to everything I strive to express, and images are obviously crucial in this film where so much happens in the characters' innermost selves. The light helps us follow the characters' journey as well as their relationships; the film becomes brighter and brighter as the relationships and tensions ease.

Would you draw a parallel between the art of making caftans and cinema – a similar type of meticulous work aiming for beauty?

As I see him, Halim is a true artist, but in a world that doesn't value this artistry. Now, people prefer making caftans industrially because it costs less, it's faster, and it's more profitable... But Halim is a purist, someone who respects his own art, his craft. He has a profound respect for materials, for fabrics, for details, which goes as far as seeking the right words. The caftan's blue color isn't just any shade of blue, it's petrolblue and no other... But Halim is sorely misunderstood and that is the reason why he closes himself to the world, and retreats to the safety of his workshop. He lives with his passion, solitarily, under his wife's protective gaze.

How did your collaboration with the film's costume designer, Rafika Ben Maimoun, go?

Rafika and I worked a lot beforehand, choosing colors, both for the caftans and for the characters' clothes. Halim is innately elegant, which is something I wanted to convey through his clothes. There's also something timeless about him. As far as Mina is concerned, all her costumes were made for the film. The sets and backgrounds were important too. I love painting, and composing a sequence is a little akin to composing on a canvas: you have to think about the balance between the colors and the textures. I also spent some time with several maalems, watching to see how they worked with their stitches; I listened to their stories. One of them told me that he was ready to do unpaid work. He couldn't live without making caftans, it was his oxygen. He hadn't been able to find an apprentice for twenty years and that brought tears to his eyes. Another master craftsman told me how one of the maalems he'd worked with had given up, to go and sell eggs at the market instead; he was heartbroken. All these stories touched me so much that I wanted to bear witness to that dedication, weave the beauty of these crafts into the film, and pay homage to them.

Was it a maalem who made the film's caftan and whose gestures we see in the close-ups?

Yes, and his name is Mr. Lalaami. In the film, we follow the making of the caftan from the initial

fabric cut to the final result. I looked for this specific shade of blue everywhere, for a long time. It was an obsession. I found all kinds of different blue hues but not my petrol-blue, it became a dizzying quest... Fortunately, I ended up finding it at the Marché Saint-Pierre in Paris' cloth district. Then I turned my research to embroidery, to find the right design. But I simply couldn't find what I was looking for. Then, one day, I took out my mother's caftan – a fifty-year-old piece of garment that I keep like a treasure – and that's when I realized that the embroidery I was looking for was that one... I took my caftan to the maalem and told him it was the motif he had to sew. The caftan that had left such a mark on me during my childhood has found its place, it all made so much sense. Mr. Lalaami was thus able to start making the caftan and coaching the actors. It was important for me to make sure they had a true understanding of the craft, that they learn how to handle the needle and thread, that they spend time with true maalems to experience things firsthand...

Saleh Bakri is fantastic in this role that has nearly no dialog, where everything must be expressed through his gestures, and his facial expressions.

Saleh's talent is tremendous, and he has this great sensitivity. When he read the screenplay, he fell in love with Halim's character. He truly understood who Halim is, his innermost rifts, what an incredibly beautiful person he is, the extent to which he has things to say to the world. And he also grasped the darker side, Halim's secret life, the fact he has to live with guilt. Halim lives in a society that execrates who he is and a religion that ostracizes him, but he has a wife who loves him and whom he loves and he feels guilty towards her. I wanted to avoid any form of judgement, there are no "good" or "evil" people in this film: Halim has a parallel, clandestine life because he has no choice. However, he takes care of his wife lovingly and with devotion until the very end; he does everything one could hope for from someone who loves them.

Lubna Azabal is remarkable in a complex blend of strength and fragility?

Mina lives with this taboo that is her husband's sexuality; she has accepted it because she loves this man. This does attest to true strength. Lubna embodied Mina in the most extraordinary manner. As I was writing, I already had Lubna's face in mind, because she exudes this strength of character in real life. We'd already worked together for ADAM and I knew what she was made of; I knew she would understand Mina. The film shoot was really difficult for her: while Mina's life was seeping from her, Lubna found out that her father was seriously ill. It all went rather fast, unfortunately, and her father died on the last day of the film shoot. Lubna had gone on a diet to lose weight and embody Mina as realistically as possible: she wanted to grow thinner with the character, she wanted to feel death taking over her body, and that's just what she did. Lubna was extraordinarily courageous, going through her character's dying and her father's last days at the same time. It was very hard, and yet there was a sort of poetry to the situation, as though she was sharing that journey with him from a distance, accompanying him towards death. Lubna is a fantastic actress, she is all in, without reserve. There's no such thing as half-measure with her, there is no pretending, she gives it her all. Her work for this film was extremely intense.

Now, let's talk about Ayoub Missioui, who plays Youssef: he is young, handsome, and talented. He too supports beautifully a role in which the dialog is rather sparse.

At first, we just think he is a handsome young man, and then no, that's not quite it: there's depth and sensitivity to Youssef, there are many qualities to be found behind the handsome façade. Youssef is generous as well, as in the scene where Mina accuses him of having lost some fabric when she knows very well that she's the one who hid it; yet he says nothing, out of generosity of spirit, for he is above this type of petty nonsense, as is Halim. This is when Mina understands that Youssef is a good man, and that he means her husband well. Mina realizes that it would be a beautiful thing for these two men to be together; she understands this gradually, as we – the viewers – do. Ayoub is 25 years old, and he is very mature for his age. We worked and talked a great deal before the film shoot and I was able to get a sense of his depth as a human being. He is handsome, indeed, but his beauty is far from being limited to physical beauty.

It's very brave of you to make such a film.

I believe that there are sometimes things that need to be expressed, stories that need to be told, and for which I don't even stop to think of whether there's any bravery involved, since what counts is to do it genuinely and with conviction.

Desire, and love should not be the subject of taboo, bans or scandals. There is nothing more beautiful than love between beings.

Precisely. Unfortunately, in Morocco, same-sex sexual activity is punished by Article 489 of the penal code. The penalty can range from a 6-month to a 3-year jail sentence. Not only is it taboo, but it's also considered a criminal offence! This law is disgraceful and I believe we need to rise up to have it abolished, in Morocco just as in other countries; people need to speak up and not be afraid.

Through its beauty as well as its intelligent and delicate approach, can your film change people's perspective in societies where certain sexual orientations are condemned?

I do hope that it can. Sharing the personal experience of a film's character, being led into a story, helps people better understand them, and perhaps that understanding can help people accept things, change their point of view. When people's perspectives change, society changes too, and then the laws follow. That's why it's very important to tell stories like Halim's, for they can change people's thinking.

In the end, isn't THE BLUE CAFTAN a film about freedom?

Absolutely. It's a film about the freedom to be who you are, to love who you want to love, whether man or woman. Above all, it's a film about love, for love encompasses all of this.



CAST

Mina LUBNA AZABAL
Halim SALEH BAKRI
Youssef AYOUB MISSIOUI

CAST

Director MARYAM TOUZANI
Script MARYAM TOUZANI
IN COLLABORATION WITH NABIL AYOUC

Producer PRODUCER NABIL AYOUC
Co-Producer AMINE BENJELLOUN
Co-Producers SEBASTIEN SCHELENZ
MIKKEL JERSIN
EVA JAKOBSON
KATRIN PORS

DOP VIRGINIE SURDEJ
Image ADIL AYOUB
Editor NICOLAS RUMPL
Casting Director RAJAE EL JAOUHARI
Sound NASSIM EL MOUNABBIH
Costumes RAFIKA BENMAIMOUN
Set Decorator EMMANUEL DE MEULEMEESTER
RACHID EL YOUSSEFI
First Assistant Director DIRECTOR ZAKARIA ATIFI

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