

TAJ INTAJ AND AGAT FILMS
PRESENT

الآن خيرة

THE LAST QUEEN

A FILM BY
DAMIEN OUNOURI & ADILA BENDIMERAD

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ORIGINAL TITLE:
EL AKHIRA / LA DERNIÈRE REINE
ENGLISH TITLE:
THE LAST QUEEN

LANGUAGE:
ALGERIAN ARABIC & BERBER, CORSICAN, SERBO-CROATIAN, FINNISH, SABIR

RUNNING TIME: 110 MIN
FORMAT: 2K
RATIO: 1,85
SOUND: 5.1
COLOR/B&W: COLOR

WORLD SALES
THE PARTY FILM SALES ON BEHALF OF ORANGE STUDIO
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INTERNATIONAL PRESS:
NOISE / MIRJAM WIEKENKAMP
VAN HALLSTRAAT 54
1051 HH AMSTERDAM
THE NETHERLANDS
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PRODUCTION
AGAT FILMS / EX NIHILO (FRANCE)
ORANGE STUDIO (FRANCE)
TAJ INTAJ (ALGERIA)
TAICCA (TAIWAN)
RED SEA FUND (SAUDI ARABIA)



SHORT SYNOPSIS:

Algeria, 1516. The pirate Aruj Barbarossa frees Algiers from the tyranny of the Spanish and seizes power over the kingdom. Rumor has it he murdered the King Salim Toumi, despite their alliance. Against all odds, one woman will stand up to him: Queen Zaphira. Between history and legend, this woman's journey tells of a struggle, of personal and political turmoil endured for the sake of Algiers.





INTERVIEW WITH ADILA BENDIMERAD AND DAMIEN OUNOURI

How did your film, *The Last Queen*, come about?

Adila Bendimerad: Through the discovery in a book about Algeria and its famous figures of Zaphira, the wife of a king, whose story vacillates between legend and reality. I very quickly realized that this character was challenged and supported by historians and chroniclers over the centuries. Whenever she comes up, there is an overwhelming desire mixed with a reconsideration of her existence. I was interested in this “knot” as an opportunity to raise the question of erasure of women in History and the power of evoking the legend at a crucial and never-before-represented time in the history of Algiers. Whether she is a legend or a reality, this woman continues to mark the imaginations of Algerians. I talked to Damien about it and we decided to give this project a cinematic scope.

Why did you choose this subject for your first feature film?

A.B.: In Algeria, there were and are still enormous means for making films and statues glorifying national heroes. The result has been works that are largely and overwhelmingly masculine and above all depicting heroes who are dehumanized in the effort to make them consensual. The only and rare women we talk about are those recognized for their military feats. Amidst all of that, Zaphira was dissonant, sensual, and, most of all, not consensual. For the rest of the world, this allowed us to reveal something else about ourselves to cinema.

Damien Ounouri: I don't see myself in this predominantly male glorification. I wanted to create fictional works around the feminine gender. There's no better way to talk about a society and a world than by talking about and starting with women. They give life. They educate. They're the heart of our society, which they almost secretly irrigate. Their discreet actions spread out in the public sphere, often indirectly through men, and influence the world. So, for me, talking about women as accurately as possible is to be as close as possible to humans.



How did you go about writing the story of Zaphira, your last queen?

D. O.: Our discussions were heated. There was an excitement and a thirst to explore an era outside of socio-cultural and religious issues that constitute most of our films from what is referred to as “the South”, but also outside of colonial history. We allowed ourselves to freely conquer our history and our imagination. There was something along the lines of emancipation, which is joyous and healthy.

Why did you want to recreate this ancient world that constitutes the historical universe of Zaphira?

A.B.: To finally show the missing images from our past. We can't continue to move forward with the black holes of our past without some place to lean back. We're missing about a thousand and one films to tell the history of Algeria, of all the underrepresented regions and cultures. For too long, we've been “told about” by others as natives without individuality or subjectivity. We have to reclaim the power of our stories.



So, an adventures film with an “s”?

D. O.: I’m a big film buff. And I want to make a film that I enjoy watching and rewatching like, for example, Paul Verhoeven’s films, which I watched when I was a kid. They have that delightful side of cinema. I wanted to bring that back again. That’s something that guides me. When I’m editing, I often remain standing to see how my body reacts and moves to the images to better feel the film’s internal rhythm. When I feel I need to sit down, it means I’ve been too static, and something needs to be improved. I like when the spectator’s body is solicited and lives in response to the film.

But there is a female strategist in your film: Chegga. Does that make *The Last Queen* a woman’s film?

A.B.: Chegga, who’s played by Imen Noel comes from a powerful family and is surrounded by powerful men. She is born political. Zaphira, the king’s second wife, has cut ties with her father and brothers. As a result, she has no protection and no one to listen to her. What “we expect”, especially from a first feminist feature film, is to choose Chegga, the politician, as the main character. It’s possible and exciting, but that, too, is a part of the “injunctions” to which I didn’t want to respond. As a woman, I like to write stories about the world and not claim anything whatsoever about my condition. What I like is to, from the very outset, is to take on the question of the human condition with these characters who fight to the end with whatever they have. In that sense, Zaphira’s journey isn’t “easy”.

D.O.: Zaphira has no political « legitimacy » and, from there, will come the most surprising, most organic, and least conventional political gestures. That’s also what is beautiful.

A.B.: Various historical accounts talk about the wife of King Salim Toumi who rose up in rebellion against the privateer Aruj Barbarossa. But in the hundreds and hundreds of pages of historical accounts, this woman’s name is never mentioned! As for Zaphira, the stories about her are highly romanticized, almost inconceivable. And yet, there was a woman, there were women. Because the men who wrote history decided to erase or discredit them, I think it’s historically and poetically important to talk about them, to imagine them, to interpret and question the few elements in our possession. It’s essential for the Female narrative to imagine these invisible forces that have made the history of humanity.

D. O.: All of this is muted because we didn’t want to make a film with a message. You have to pay close attention to see the extent to which, deep down, there are all of these feminine riches and nuances.

***The Last Queen* is also about women’s physical courage, which is the common denominator among the three heroines: Zaphira, Chegga, and Astrid the Scandinavian.**

A.B.: Astrid, the freed slave (played by Nadia Tereszkewicz) will say to Aruj in reference to Queen Zaphira, “I wanted to hurt that woman, but that woman reminds me of myself when I was a slave and struggled alone”. Whether queens or slaves, women throughout history have had no choice but to be brave. Our film is indeed set during a feminist era.



The character of the privateer Aruj is also instrumental in sowing tension and flamboyance.

D. O.: There was an urge to fully show this adventurer. In discovering the temperament of Dali Benssalah, the actor who plays Aruj, we sensed we had the physical and mental density needed for this character. Dali possesses the experience and physical strength that make him a relentless warrior in the face of the King of Algiers, who is equally as charismatic. He's a real king: highly cultivated, peace-loving, and hailing from a line of wise men, thinkers, and scientists. The confrontation between these two masculine worlds was beautiful.

How did you go about developing the ambiguous relationship between Zaphira and Aruj?

D. O.: The challenge was to make this relationship magnetic and romantic. It had to be sort of honed as the story progressed. We knew that the encounter between these two characters was going to happen fairly late. As a result, we had to maximize every detail in their interactions through little touches to create anticipation. We begin by bringing them closer together psychologically in the spectator's mind through editing - by cross-cutting sequences, for example. In doing so, we establish the beginning of a bond before one of spoken word and ultimately one of touch. There must be that love-hate instinct of which they're aware before actually meeting.



The Last Queen is a very ritualized film with numerous sequences in which the visual spirit of ceremony is important. Can you tell us about your artistic direction?

D. O.: These rituals are a legacy from ancient Algeria. They structure homes, ranks in the families, and that also frames women's lives. It was a real challenge to constantly find ways to stage them because, in some ways, they're new codes being brought to the screen: how do we resuscitate these gestures and these ancestral languages and make them intelligible to others without betraying them?

Tell us about the costume adventure.

A.B.: Initially, we thought we'd borrow or rent costumes from collectors or institutions, but no 16th-century Algerian costumes existed! Nothing had ever been created. We had to make everything ourselves. We started from texts written by Leyla Belkaïd, a costume anthropologist and Algerian costume specialist, and ended up meeting and working with her. Then, Jean Marc Mireté, a Franco-Algerian costume designer, took over for the design and creation. We ultimately created a heritage of costumes for Algerian cinema. If one day other filmmakers want to make a film set during this era, they won't have to start from scratch, it won't be the same anxiety, because the costumes from *The Last Queen* exist and are available for the cinema.





And the sets?

A. B.: It was very important to avoid shooting in studio, in another country, and instead to show the wealth of what remains of our heritage. But what remains are in fact crumbs. And we recreated the palaces with those “crumbs”. All those palaces were razed during colonization, and more than three quarters of Algeria’s medinas and Casbahs were destroyed. Lost forever. We had to shoot in various cities to find the courtyard in one, the bedroom or even a corridor in another.

D.O.: We insisted on showing what have left. There was a lot of iconographic research in museums and books, a lot of elements inspired by accounts from travelers to the Maghreb, the Middle East, and Algiers in particular, on the materials used, wood, fabrics, pigments, paints... This colossal artistic direction was led by Ferial Gasmi Issiakhem, an architect and designer, for whom this was a first experience in film. She was able to surround herself with artists and craftspeople to design and make unique pieces, dressing and breathing life into sometimes seven-hundred-year-old structures like Zaphira’s bedroom.

But how were we to emphasize all that work in the image when I hadn’t yet met the “right” director of photography for this film? Just a month and a half before filming started, a man appeared before us with an enormous tattoo on his back. And not just any tattoo: “The Raft of the Medusa” by Géricault. His name: Shaadi Chaaban. His native country: Lebanon. His profession: director of photography. He showed up like the Messiah, young, available, and so talented. With an insistence on accuracy and heightened beauty, incredible sensitivity, and a total investment in the film. From our very first exchange, we discussed pictorial references, which gradually evolved and sharpened. We came up against two challenges: the white walls of Algiers (the walls are traditionally whitened with chalk) whereas we wanted to create a fairly harsh, contrasted, and sometimes dark atmosphere, and lighting with fire.

AB/. Shaadi arrived for the second round of filming in 2021 and is one of the miraculous events. Like the resumption of filming one year after stopping it on March 17, 2020, due to the pandemic. Filming was stopped after just two days in 2020 and only resumed in 2021.

Can you also tell us about the outdoor scenes that give the film an epic dimension?

D. O.: To counterbalance the script's numerous indoor scenes, I wanted the outdoor scenes to be spectacular the moment we go outside. There is indeed this quest for the epic, a taste for the ancient Mediterranean strength, for nature to heighten characters' emotions. For the beach battles, we went more than 500 km from Algiers to the western part of the country to find that powerful nature, those enormous rocks. I wanted the characters to be assimilated to that nature to also show the brief temporality of man's acts, our finite nature in the face of a seemingly immutable geological scale. And by extension, we didn't necessarily try to create very realistic battles, but rather a violent choreography for a merciless struggle that serves tragedy and, for me, evokes the battles of the demi-gods of Antiquity.

Surrounding all these visual motifs are what we could call sound motifs.

Why did you want so many audible languages in your film?

A.B.: For the different sounds. There are nearly seven languages spoken in the film! Algiers was a truly cosmopolitan city. There was a Dutch neighborhood, a Maltese neighborhood, there were Albanians, Serbs, Sudanese, slaves, Corsicans, Icelandic slaves, hordes of Jews and Muslims who came from Andalusia. A thousand languages were spoken here. We come from these mixtures and it's magnificent. Today, we're ashamed of it although it's this hybridization that's perceived through our names, our cuisine, our faces – and it's probably our greatest strength.



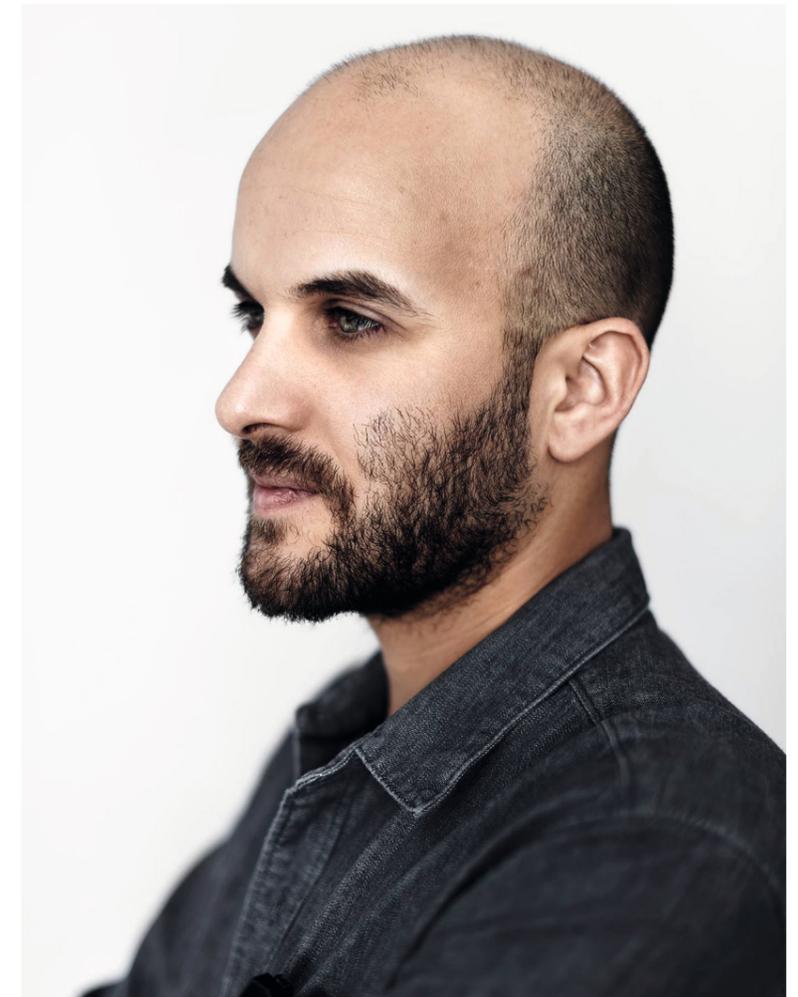


DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY:



ADILA BENDIMERAD'S BIOGRAPHY:

Adila BENDIMERAD is an Algerian actress, script-writer, director and producer, based in Algiers. In 2011, the actress (*THE REPENTANT*, *THE ROOFTOPS*, *NORMAL* by Merzak Allouache, *STILL BURNING* by Georges Hachem) created the company TAJ INTAJ in Algiers to promote young Algerian talent. Her production of *THE DAYS BEFORE* (2013) by Karim Moussaoui received worldwide acclaim, from Locarno Festival, to her nomination for a César. *KINDIL EL BAHR* (2016) by Damien Ounouri was selected for Cannes Directors' Fortnight. In co-production with AGAT FILMS / Ex Nihilo (France), she produced *THE LAST QUEEN*, which she co-wrote and co-directed with Ounouri and in which she also takes on the lead role as Queen Zaphira.



DAMIEN OUNOURI'S BIOGRAPHY:

Damien OUNOURI is an Algerian director based in Algiers. He studied cinema theory, developing its practical application as a self-taught skill. His documentary *FIDAI* (2012), co-produced by the Chinese director Jia Zhang-Ke, had its premiere at the Toronto TIFF and was shown in cinemas throughout France. His medium-length film *KINDIL EL BAHR* (2016) had its premiere at Cannes Directors' Fortnight and was broadcast on ARTE. He also directs video-clips and commercials, teaches at cinematographic workshops, and is Associate Producer for TAJ INTAJ (Algeria). *THE LAST QUEEN* is his first full-length feature film.

DALI BENSSALAH'S BIOGRAPHY:

DALI BENSSALAH'S BIOGRAPHY:

After high-school graduation, Dali Benssalah studied Economics at the University of Rennes while training hard for thai boxing competitions.

In 2012, he left college and moved to Paris with a real desire to work in cinema. He joined the prestigious Cours Florent where he discovered the dramatic arts and decided to devote his full time to it. He continued his training at the National Theatres of la Colline and then of Strasbourg with Stanislas Nordey and at the FabricA d'Avignon with Olivier Py.

In 2017, he made his breakthrough to the public in the video clip for The Blaze - *TERRITORY*, which went on to win multiple awards at festivals.

Several directors noticed him and asked to meet him for TV and cinema projects including *NOX* by Mabrouk El Mechri (Canal+), Louis Garrel's *A FAITHFUL MAN*, Kery James and Leïla Sy's *BANLIEUSARDS* and most recently in Canal+ new original creation, *LES SAUVAGES*, series directed by Rebecca ZLOTOWSKI, also starring Roschdy Zem and Marina Foïs.

He then joined the cast of the latest James Bond film *NO TIME TO DIE* by Cary Joji Fukunaga with Daniel Craig, Rami Malek, Ralph Fiennes and Lea Seydoux

His latest project include Yohan Manca's *MY BROTHERS AND I* (Cannes 2021), *TROPIQUE DE LA VIOLENCE* by Manuel Schapira, *A FLOWER IN THE MOUTH* by Eric Baudelaire (Berlinale 2022), the Arte mini-series *ALGER CONFIDENTIEL* by Frédéric Jardin, *THE LINE* by Ursula Meier (Berlinale 2022) as well as Netflix's *ATHENA* by Romain Gavras and *THE LAST QUEEN* by Damien Ounouri and Adila Bendimerad both selected at the 2022 Venice International Film Festival.





CAST

ADILA BENDIMERAD

(QUEEN ZAPHIRA)

DALI BENSSALAH

(ARUJ « BARBAROSSA »)

TAHAR ZAOUÏ

(KING SALIM TOUMI)

IMEN NOËL

(QUEEN CHEGGA)

NADIA TERESZKIEWICZ

(THE SCANDINAVIAN)

SUPPORTING CAST

YANIS AOUÏNE

(PRINCE YAHIA)

AHMED ZITOUNI

(THE BOSNIAN)

TARIK BOUARRARA

(YOUNÈS)

DIMITRI BOETTO

(ISHAK)

TENOÛ KHILLOULI

(ZOKHA)

SLIMANE BENOÛARI

(CHERFAOUI)

HALIM ZREÏBI

(CHERIF)

FETHI NOÛRI

(KHALED TOUMI)

RABIH OUDJAOUT

(HADJADJ)





CREW

SCREENPLAY: ADILA BENDIMERAD, DAMIEN OUNOURI
PHOTOGRAPHY: SHADI CHAABAN
SOUND RECORDIST: AMINE TEGGAR
ART DIRECTOR & SET DESIGNER: FERIEL GASMI ISSIAKHEM
COSTUME DESIGNER: JEAN MARC MIRETÉ
MAKE UP & HAIR: SAMIA ZITOUNI / CELIA OUDNI
IST AD: FOUAD TRIFI
EDITOR: MATTHIEU LACLAU, YANN-SHAN TSAI
SOUND MIXERS: LI DAN-FENG, BOOK CHIEN
GRADING: YOV MOOR
MUSIC: EVGUENI & SACHA GALPERINE
VFX: FILM TAILOR STUDIO,
MOONSHINE ANIMATION, APACHE PICTURE

PRODUCTION

YEAR: 2022
GENRE: HISTORICAL DRAMA
FORMAT: 1.85 – 2K
COUNTRY OF PRODUCTION: ALGERIA, FRANCE, KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA,
QATAR, TAIWAN
PRODUCTION COMPANY: TAJ INTAJ (Algeria)
Producer: Adila Bendimerad
PRODUCTION COMPANY: AGAT FILMS (France)
Producer: Patrick Sobelman
CO-PRODUCTION COMPANY: ORANGE STUDIO (France)
CO-PRODUCTION COMPANY : CADC (Algeria)
CO-PRODUCTION COMPANY:
YI TIAO LONG HU BAO INTERNATIONAL ENTERTAINMENT CO. (Taiwan)
Producers: Roger Huang, Justine O.
WORLD SALES: THE PARTY FILM SALES ON BEHALF OF ORANGE STUDIO
FRENCH DISTRIBUTION: JOUR 2 FÊTE
ADDITIONAL CO-PRODUCERS:
Centre Algérien de Développement du Cinéma – CADC (Algeria),
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Sofinergie 5 (France),
Yi Tiao Long Hu Bao International Entertainment Co (Taiwan),
Taiwan Creative Content Agency

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