



Dea Liane : "This film is really a tale about freedom, with a lot of dark humor."

With a keen sense of aesthetics and a scenario as subtle as captivating, The Man Who Sold His Skin by filmmaker Kaouther Ben Hania, has conquered the audience of the Institut Lumière. A powerful work that has made history as the first Tunisian film selected for the Oscars. A jewel of cinema presented by the luminous Dea Liane, interpreter of the character of Abeer. Selected excerpts.

A tale of initiation

The story of the film was born when Kaouther Ben Hania saw the work of art *Tim*, 2006 by the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye at the Louvre Museum. He plays the character of the insurance agent in the film ! At the same time, Kaouther had known people who had lived through the war in Syria. She wanted to bring together the world of contemporary art and that of Syrian refugees. For me, this film is really a tale about freedom, with a lot of dark humor. I have the impression that she wanted to show that man has an intrinsic freedom, whatever the circumstances of his life. The Visa tattooed on the skin of the character of Sam Ali (played by Yahya Mahayni) opens the doors of Europe while making him a prisoner.

A casting call on Facebook

I had seen a casting ad on Facebook where she was looking for Syrian actors. I am Syrian but I grew up mostly in France. I told myself that my level of Arabic was not perfect, but that I wanted to try. I thought I would fail the auditions because of that, but I must say that I was well coached by my Syrian cousins (laughs) ! For the casting, I had to send a video in which I improvise a scene where I leave my husband. Yahya Mahayni is a lawyer, and I have more experience in theater than in cinema: I think that, for him, as for me, making this film was a dream come true !

Working with Kaouther Ben Hania

Kaouther writes scenes in the form of an outline: a week prior to shooting, she gathered us to make us play scenes in front of the lenses. We were able to improvise scenes, some of which were kept for the final cut, such as the scene where Sam Ali pretends to talk to his girlfriend on the phone while he is facing a statue. The film was completely rewritten in the editing process. When I saw it for the first time, I said to myself that Kaouther had made the most accurate choices possible. For me, this woman is a genius, she makes everyone work together, while remaining very mysterious. This film was made with a very low budget, one of the scenes that takes place in the museum was actually shot in a hangar in Tunisia: Kaouther has recreated an entire museum!

Nominated for an Oscar

The film represented Tunisia at the Oscars 2021 in the category of best foreign film. This story is unbelievable : keep in mind that in the United States, there is a real campaign for the Oscars' nominations. For this film, it was done relentlessly : by email, by phone call. I happened to have worked on a play where the costume designer was an Oscar voter!

Her film projects

My next film, *Motherhood*, is currently being edited. Directed by Canadian-Tunisian filmmaker Meryem Joobeur, this story follows the return of a young man, a former member of Daech, to his native village in Tunisia.

Laura Lépine