



FESTIVAL DE CANNES  
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2022 OFFICIAL SELECTION

# REBEL

A FILM BY  
ADIL & BILALL



CAVIAR, BELUGA TREE, CALACH FILMS and LE COLLECTIF 64 present



ABOUBAKR  
BENSAIHI

LUBNA  
AZABAL

AMIR  
EL ARBI

# REBEL

A FILM BY  
ADIL & BILALL

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# SYNOPSIS

When Kamal resolves to change his life for the better, he leaves Belgium to help war victims in Syria. But, having arrived, he is forced to join a militia and is left stranded in Raqqa. Back home, his younger brother Nassim quickly becomes easy prey for radical recruiters, who promise to reunite him with his brother. Their mother, Leila, fights to protect the only thing she has left: her youngest son.





# INTERVIEW WITH **ADIL & BILALL** DIRECTORS

**What is your definition of the word *Rebel*, and why did you choose it as the title of your film?**

The word *Rebel* is immediately understandable in many languages, so ideal, internationally speaking. It's simple and iconic. It symbolises different aspects of our film. First, the historical aspect around the lexical field of the Syrian propaganda of the Islamic State, which called its fighters rebels. Then in the way one of the characters, Kamal, the older brother (Aboubakr Bensaihi) sees himself, as a rebel who rides a motorbike, like in a James Dean movie. And finally, there are those rebelling against the Islamic State and its dictatorship.

**Why did you choose to tell this story: the radicalisation of a young Belgian of Moroccan origin, and the consequences for his family?**

In 2012, 2013, people our age, our generation, most of them of Moroccan origin like us, who lived in Belgium, decided to go to Syria. It was something we'd never seen before. There was no such phenomenon during the war in Iraq. Sometimes we knew these young people, or they were friends of friends. Everyone in Belgium of Moroccan origin knew someone who went, these young people often went in groups. We wondered what they were going to do in Syria.

## And in 2014?

In 2014, suddenly things accelerated. The Islamic State established its hegemony. The whole world really found out with the terrorist attacks of 2015 and 2016. We all witnessed this progressive phenomenon involving our entire generation. This was a war very close to us, suddenly, whereas usually wars took place without us and far away. We had never seen Belgians, Flemish people, in that part of the world. It was a new thing, for example, to see propaganda films from terrorist organisations with people who looked like us, spoke like us, and came from our neighbourhoods. It seemed totally impossible. We both felt that we had to tell these stories. We were already interested in doing that in 2013 but while we were writing, we realised that the situation was changing every year, then every month. We were witnessing a war that was somehow ours, our generation's war. We had to talk about it, as other filmmakers talked about Vietnam or World War 2, for us, it was this war.

## What kind of prep did such a subject require?

We did a huge amount of research. We spoke to many people. In 2014 we collected the first stories of young people we knew who went there. We talked with their families. We

listened a lot and took notes. In the end the film isn't based on the story of a single family, but on several interweaving stories that we wanted to reconstitute as realistically as possible. The Islamic State is something truly different from all other terrorist organisations. We worked a lot on the evolution of this movement, we had to deliver as nuanced as possible a narrative to understand how young people were abused by this organisation. What makes young Belgians who play football become radicalised to the point of going to Syria? It's as if they're part of a gang. It seemed very important to us to make a film that would also be like an historical document, something quite complete. We had to try and make the complexity of the evolution of the Islamic State and the horrors its members have committed comprehensible, because it's not only a question of religious radicalisation, but also the story of a movement that could qualify as organised crime.

## The family in *Rebel* consists of a single woman and her two sons. One is a young man, the other still a child. Why this configuration?

The older brother represents the youths who went to Syria before the Islamic State existed, to prevent massacres perpetrated by Bashar El Assad and his regime against his own





people. Some left for humanitarian reasons, others to fight, and others because they were already radicalised. So it was a mix of motivations. Among these people, many left with a naïve and idealised notion that they'd help protect and defend a population of innocent people. Once there, these non-Syrian fighters of foreign origin were faced with the fast-growing extremism of the Islamic State. Its members are like the mafia, they eliminate all the other organisations and take all these young people, some of whom were real monsters but others who had absolutely no idea what awaited them.

**Is this what happens to the character of Kamal who left for Syria to help people?**

Yes, we also wanted to explain how radicalisation works in Belgium, the kind of brainwashing of which these young people and the characters in the film are victims. They are taught about Islam, but also much more about other things in order to recruit them, it's like a sect. Faced with this, the mother, played by Lubna Azabal, symbolises the distress of these many Belgian parents. There were cases of children who, in the space of three weeks, became radicalised and ended up in Syria! What to do as parents? Many fear that their children will become lost in this radicalisation, they too

are victims. We also chose to film a family where the father is absent, to show how recruiters can take advantage of fragile domestic situations. The recruiter is a bit like the big brother who fills a gap, it often happens that many of these young people who leave do it to fill a void, to give meaning to their lives, and a terrorist organisation like the Islamic State makes very good use of their search for direction.

**You set the Belgian part of your film in Molenbeek, a city now notorious for the number of young people who left for Syria.**

Molenbeek, and Belgium, proportionally, have the largest percentage of people who left for Syria to fight for the Islamic State. The Belgians in Syria were known as the ones who arrived at the beginning of the war in Syria. Nobody can clearly explain why Belgium has this high percentage, two, three times the norm of other countries. Many young people feel they don't exist, but there, in Syria, they are told they will exist, they will be part of something great and important, they will be heroes. Everyone wants to exist, to do something bigger than themselves.

**You make a cinema concerned with movement, with territories. Your characters are in constant motion. *Rebel* is**

**the epitome of this, with a flow between several countries.**

This comes from our own identities. We both grew up as people of Moroccan origin born in Belgium. It's not always easy, particularly when you're young. Are you Belgian? Are you Moroccan? Are you Flemish? When you're a child you think you're Belgian like everyone else, but as a teenager, you are put in a box. That's when you understand that you're not really like all the other Belgians. Whether you wanted it or not, from September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, you were made to understand that you were Arab and Muslim. Our names are different, we don't exactly look like the others. So you start looking for yourself, for a clear identity. OK, so we're Moroccan, Muslim, that's our tribe, until you try to integrate this tribe, be it in Morocco or Belgium. But here again, you understand you're not a hundred percent Moroccan either! That you are still Belgian, that you are also in part the product of your environment, the territory on which you grew up.

So, you are always looking for yourself, for your identity, particularly at the age when you are in search of yourself. That's what we talk about in our films: never knowing where you belong. This is really the case with the young characters in *Rebel*. They don't know exactly who they should be, so

they take on the most extreme identity, that way it's clear, they know where they stand, until the moment they realise they've joined a tribe of monsters. Even if it's a terrible illusion, radicalism can be comforting when you don't know where or who you are, when you're between two cultures, the product of a mix no one wants. Once in Syria, these young people realise that the reality is very different from what they thought, that the Syrians are the first victims of the Islamic State as they were the victims of Bashar Al Assad's regime. We really wanted to show that. These young people also encounter other Arab languages, the Arabic spoken in Syria is not the same as in Morocco, etc, and this makes them wonder even more who they are. Moroccan. Belgian... it's not easy to know who you are.

**One of the traits of your cinema is the use of music. You go beyond the simple use of a soundtrack or a song to illustrate sequences, since *Rebel* is a musical tragedy. Can you tell us about this choice?**

Music is important in all our films. And the musical is one of our favourite film genres. It started with Disney films, *Aladdin* and *The Lion King* and later with films like *Moulin Rouge* by Baz Luhrmann. We have always said that one day we'd make a film with full musical sequences. The tragic



subject of *Rebel* lent itself to this. The complexity of the characters, their motivations for moving to a war zone... We thought all this would be expressed in an unforgettable way through song and dance. No dialogue spoken in a classic way would achieve the strength of this form of expression carried by music and song.

The musical aspect is a perfect tool for this film, because it is an important aspect of Arabo-Islamic culture. It's modern hip hop just as much as traditional pure melody, in the spirit of Scheherazade recounting the *One Thousand and One Nights*. Arabic poetry is renowned, many musical instruments were invented in Arabic countries, music really is a big part of our culture, it's very rich, very diverse, very significant, political and poetic, lyrical, and a great source of influence, and what was interesting was that the Islamic State is totally against music. They banned it in Mosul; some people who left Iraq because they owned a musical instrument shop actually played for our film. For the Islamic State, music is the enemy; for us, it is the richness and the whole diversity of our culture.

If we want to make a film that is also a kind of tract against the Islamic State, music is very appropriate. It is universal, it touches the heart directly, it's not intellectual. When Ka-

mal sings and dances about the reasons why he wants to leave, he does it in a powerful rap that matches the origin of hip hop, a militant genre. Aboubakr Bensaihi (who plays Kamal) is also a rapper, he wrote the songs he sings in the film. And there is also the singer Oum, who recalls the heart-breaking traditional song style. The combination of these two musical styles was our very logical ambition to make a modern *Arabian Nights*.

### How did you choose your actors?

Aboubakr Bensaihi was the lead in our film *Black*. He's also from Molenbeek, he knows people who went. The subject is close to his heart, so it was logical that he'd be Kamal. Lubna Azabal is our favourite actress, it was our dream to work with her. Growing up in Brussels we thought, she's a Belgian actress, and Moroccan, who makes international films. She's a big star who has acted in many different types of films. Finally, the part of Nassim is played by Amir El Arbi, Adil's younger brother. He was ten when we shot the film. He's someone who has always watched the news, a bit like Adil at his age, so he knew about the Islamic State. He remembers how stressed we were when the Paris attacks took place, then later in Brussels. Here, it's a massive trauma for all. Of course, when he read the script, he learned a lot



more about what really happened in Syria, but we didn't show him any videos, only photos of radicalised children dressed as soldiers, posing. Amir took on his role with great maturity, he understood what was being acted out.

**The relationship between male and female characters is treated in a very specific way. There's the traditional relationship to the mother, which is essential, and the more complex, intimidated relationship to the young woman. How did you work on the connection of these young heroes caught between East and West, and women?**

By working on the relationship Kamal has with a sense of his decency. This relationship differs depending on the education you receive in each family of course, but there is a sort of common thread that can be drawn from some of these young men who left. This thread leads to a somehow uncomfortable relationship that leads, again in the case of these young people in Syria, to two extremes: either we allow ourselves everything, or nothing. In both cases, this is a totally false relationship these young men have, they don't know how to handle it, they haven't been able to learn how to build a natural and healthy bond with women. This is something you often find in the neighbourhoods where there is a lot of social control and stress. People from the

Islamic State use the abuse of women as a weapon of war. Women are the greatest victims of these conflicts, which is why it was important to show it in the film, the lives of these women in this war.

**Talk to us about your visual choices. In what spirit did you film Belgium, with those dark, cold blues, and Syria, in blinding ochres, both shades being very significant and ultimately violent?**

With Robrecht Heyvaert, our DP, who has worked on all our films, we had just shot *Bad Boys for Life*, so a totally different cinematographic atmosphere, since for *Rebel*, filmmakers like Jacques Audiard (for his deep and edgy sense of hard, powerful light) and Kore-Eda (whose films we all watched during the writing, for his sense of family storytelling) inspired us. We could also add Denis Villeneuve with *Incendies*. Visually, we knew we needed a difference between Belgium and Syria, even if, without even wanting it, this difference came automatically since the sun and the environment of the two countries are so different. Belgium is an old country, with ancient architecture, but there's also a lot of concrete, the weather is grey, it's cold; then we go to a completely different world, Syria is a territory of Westerns. They don't have horses, but they have motorbikes! We fil-



med this Wild West which has nothing mythical about it, without embellishing anything.

### **Similarly, how did you work on the sound?**

The sound was designed to highlight the fact that *Rebel* is a musical tragedy, and a war film. The sound “renders” the environment through which the characters move. It allows an immersion that’s indispensable to this type of cinema. We are in this world, but not only. The sound also allows us to play with the real, the surreal, the conscious and the unconscious. It was of paramount importance to us. We had to have moments where we’re not sure that what we’re seeing is reality – maybe we’re in a dream, in the imagination, perhaps we’re in the head of our characters, while suddenly the repeated sound of a motorbike plays like the reminder for Nassim, the little brother, of Kamal’s absence. But the sound of this bike is also the sound of freedom to conquer, thus the sound of danger, risk, poetry. The sound is what required the most work and research to infuse our film with a very special identity.

### **What did you learn from this film?**

It’s our most personal film. The most poetic. It taught us that making musicals is even harder work than classic films, but the next time, we’ll go even further!



# DIRECTORS

# ADIL & BILALL

Belgian-Moroccan Muslim filmmakers Adil and Bilall first gained attention in 2015 with their film **Black**, which premiered at the Toronto Film Festival, where it won the Discovery section. Further film credits include **Gangsta**, which was selected in Palm Springs, where Adil & Bilall were shortlisted in "10 Directors to Watch". In 2020, they directed **Bad Boys for Life**, starring Will Smith and Martin Lawrence, which grossed over \$426 million at the worldwide box office.

Adil & Bilal's television credits include pilots for the critically acclaimed FX series **Snowfall** in 2017, as well as the series **Soil**, which debuted on Netflix in 2021 after winning three Ensor Awards in Belgium, including Best Television Show. More recently, they directed the pilot and additional episodes of the highly anticipated series **Ms. Marvel**, starring Iman Vellani. They also served as executive producers on the series, which will debut on Disney+ on June 8, 2022.

**Rebel**, which the duo co-wrote and co-directed, will premiere as a Midnight Screening at the 2022 Cannes Film Festival. They are currently in post-production on Warner Bros. and DC Films' **Batgirl**, starring Leslie Grace.





# FILMOGRAPHY

- 2022**      **BATGIRL** (Film, Post-Production) | Directors
- 2022**      **MS. MARVEL** (TV Series, Post-Production) | Directors & Executive Producers
- 2022**      **REBEL** (Film) | Directors & Writers  
**Cannes Film Festival 2022** – Official Selection
- 2021**      **SOIL** (TV Series) | Directors  
**Film Fest Gent 2021** – Official Selection  
**Film Festival Ostend Ensors 2022**  
*Best TV Series, Best Script & Best Acting Performance in a Leading Role*
- 2020**      **BAD BOYS FOR LIFE** (Film) | Directors  
*Critics Choice Super Awards 2020*  
**NAACP Image Awards 2020** – *Outstanding Motion Picture*  
**BET Awards 2020**  
**People's Choice Awards 2020** – *Favorite Motion Picture, Favorite Male Movie Star*
- 2018**      **GANGSTA** (Film) | Directors, Editors, Writers  
**Palm Springs International Film Festival 2018**  
*Variety's Directors to Watch*  
**Film Festival Ostend Ensors 2018** - *Telenet Audience Award*
- 2017**      **SCALPED** (TV Movie) | Directors

- 2017**      **SNOWFALL** (TV Series) | Directors
- 2017**      **HASHTAG** (Short) | Directors, Editors, Writers
- 2015**      **BLACK** (Film) | Directors & Writers  
 Toronto International Film Festival 2015 – *Discovery Award*  
 Film Fest Gent 2015 – *Port of Ghent Public Choice Award*  
 Tallin Film Festival 2015 – Official Selection – *Best Actress*  
 Gijon Film Festival 2015 – Official Selection  
 Festival International du Film Francophone 2015 – Official Selection  
 Film Festival Ostend Ensors 2016  
*Best Direction, Best Actress, Best Editor, Telenet Audience Award*  
 Ramdam Festival 2016 - *Best Film & Most Impressive Film of the Year*  
 SXSW 2016 – Narrative Spotlight Selection  
 Edinburgh International Film Festival 2016 – Official Selection  
 Hamburg Film Festival 2016 – Official Selection  
 Netia Off Camera International Festival of Independent Cinema 2016 - *Making Way Award*  
 Black Film Festival Montreal 2016 – *Best Narrative Feature*
- 2014**      **IMAGE** (Film) | Directors & Writers  
 Film Festival Ostend Ensors 2015 – *Telenet Audience Award*  
 Netherlands Film Festival 2015 – Official Selection
- 2012**      **BERGICA** (TV Series) | Directors & Writers
- 2011**      **BROEDERS** (Short) | Directors & Writers  
 Film Fest Gent 2011 – *Best Student Short*  
 Leuven international Film Festival 2011 – *Audience Award*  
 Flanders Audiovisual Fund 2011 – *Wildcard Award*

# ACTORS

## ABOUBAKR BENSAIHI

Aboubakr Bensaihi is a Belgian actor born in Molenbeek (Brussels, Belgium) in 1996. In addition to acting in films and television series, he is also active in the theater and as a musician under the name "Bakr".

Aboubakr made his debut with one of the leading roles Adil & Bilal's **Black**, for which he was nominated for Best Actor at the Flemish Ensor Awards and Magritte Awards.

He subsequently appeared in the award-winning feature film **Binti** by Frederike Migom and the TV series **Thuis** and **Soil**. He plays the lead role in **Rebel**.

## LUBNA AZABAL

Lubna Azabal is a Belgian actress. Her first cinema role came when André Techiné cast her in **Far**, in which her talent was immediately apparent.

In 2012, she received the Magritte award for Best Actress for her role Denis Villeneuve's **Incendies**. In 2017, she starred opposite Olivier Gourmet in François Troukens and Jean-François Hensgens' **Above the Law**, and again won Best Actress at the Magritte Awards in 2019. In 2018 she starred in Sameh Zoabi's **Tel Aviv On Fire** and Maryam Touzami's **Adam**.

# AMIR EL ARBI

Parallel to her cinema career, she appears regularly on stage, most recently in two pieces by Wajdi Mouawad: **Fauves** and **Racine Carrée du Verbe Être** at the Théâtre de la Colline.

Forthcoming film roles include **Pour la France** by Rachid Hami, and she is at Cannes this year in both Adil & Bilal's **Rebel**, and **The Blue Caftan** by Maryam Touzani (Un Certain Regard).

Amir El Arbi was born in 2010 in Molenbeek, Brussels in Belgium. He is the younger brother of film director Adil El Arbi.

In 2020, Adil & Bilal did a camera test for **Rebel**, where it became instantly clear that Amir was perfect for the part of Nassim. Before shooting, he prepared for 10 months with Adil & Bilal and an acting coach. He played a small part in their series **Soil** in the summer of 2020 so that he could get a sense of a professional film set before starting principal photography of **Rebel**.





# CAST

**KAMAL**  
**LEILA**  
**NASSIM**  
**NOOR**  
**ABU AMAR**

ABOUBAKR BENSAIHI  
LUBNA AZABAL  
AMIR EL ARBI  
TARA ABBOUD  
YOUNES BOUAB

**IDRISS**  
**IMAN YUSUF**  
**IBRAHIM**  
**HIND**

FOUAD HAJJI  
KAMAL MOUMMAD  
SAÏD BOUMAZOUGHE  
MALAK SEBAR

# CREW

**DIRECTED BY**  
**WRITTEN BY**

**PRODUCED BY**  
**COPRODUCERS**

**EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS**

**DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY**  
**EDITOR**

**ORIGINAL MUSIC**  
**CHOREOGRAPHY**

**PRODUCTION DESIGNER**

**VISUAL EFFECTS SUPERVISOR**

**COSTUME DESIGNER**

**MAKEUP ARTIST**

**HAIR STYLISTS**

**SOUND**

ADIL & BILALL

ADIL EL ARBI, JAN VAN DYCK, KEVIN MEUL,  
BILALL FALLAH

BERT HAMELINCK, DIMITRI VERBEECK  
DIANA ELBAUM, JESUS GONZALEZ-ELVIRA,  
BRAHIM CHIOUA, MARC DUJARDIN, VINCENT MARAVAL  
ROBIN KERREMANS, MICHAEL SAGOL, ADIL EL ARBI,  
BILALL FALLAH

ROBRECHT HEYVAERT

FRÉDÉRIC THORAVAL, ACE

HANNES DE MAEYER WITH OUM & BAKR

SIDI LARBI CHERKAOUI

PEPIJN VAN LOOY

KRIS JANSSENS

ULI SIMON

VÉRONIQUE DUBRAY

NATHALIE DE HEN, EVIE HAMELS

LOÏC COLLIGNON, MICHELLE COUTTOLENC,  
JAIME BAKSHT, KEVIN O'CONNELL, NICOLAS LEROY,  
GAEL NICOLAS, FREDERIC DUBOIS, RANA EID,  
ANGELO DOS SANTOS

**POST-PRODUCTION SUPERVISOR  
PRODUCTION DIRECTOR  
1<sup>st</sup> ASSISTANT DIRECTOR**

JO NIJNS  
DAVID RAGONIG  
PETER GHESQUIÈRE

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