
Outside The Law, review

(French) Dir: Rachid Bouchareb; starring: Sami Bouajila, Roschdy Zem, Jamel Debbouze

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It's a measure of the feelings that the history of Algeria's anti-colonial struggle against France still ignite that police with batons and shields lined the Palais before the premiere of Rachid Bouchareb's *Outside The Law*. Audiences members were frisked, bottles confiscated: Cannes, however temporarily, had turned into a modern-day airport. Later around 1200 protestors gathered to denounce the film as anti-French and for celebrating terrorism. It was, irrespective of your feelings on the subject, or on the film (which, of course, the protestors had yet to see), heartwarming that cinema maintains the power to generate controversy.

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An earlier film by Bouchareb, 2006's *Days of Glory*, was a memorial to those North African soldiers whose sacrifices on behalf of France during World War II had been largely ignored by the fatherland. It even led to Jacques Chirac passing a law that awarded pensions to survivors. *Outside The Law* is another righteous historical epic that begins in 1925 with a French colonial officer telling a poor but proud rural family that the land they have lived on for generations is to be expropriated. Twenty years later, Europe is liberated, but thousands of Algerians taking to the streets of Setif to clamour for their own liberation are brutally gunned down by soldiers.

The film follows three brothers who, in different ways, were caught up in that massacre, and all of them the sons of that man whose land had been stolen from him two decades before. Abdelkader (Sami Bouajila), already an intellectual devoted to the cause of independence, is sent to jail, from which he emerges years later even more radicalized, to the extent of believing only warfare on French soil will bring about change. Messaoud (Roschdy Zem) serves in the French army fighting in Indochina, but returns, the chants of Viet-Cong insurgents still ringing in his ears, to help Abdelkader recruit members for the revolutionary FLN movement. Said (Jamel Debbouze), is keener on profits than politics, moving to Paris where he becomes a pimp, nightclub owner and boxing promoter.

There's no denying the partisan passion that Bouchareb brings to his chronicle of the subterfuge and bloodshed of the late 1950s and early 1960s. His subject matter may be political, but his instincts are commercial. He's styled *Outside The Law*, in its familial focus, its appreciation of the value of regular shoot-outs, and its attention to costumes (though these are literalist: clever Abdelkader wears glasses, Said dons raffish 'I am a pimp' gear), in the fashion of *The Godfather*. It's all bracing stuff – although the female figures (especially the brothers' mother, portrayed as a sobbing martyr) are one-dimensional, and the music is crashingly melodramatic – but it's hard to escape the feeling that depth and complexity are being flattened in the pursuit of accessibility.

The rivalry between the FLN and the MNA party comes across as little more than a minor scuffle between heroic warriors and a benevolent society for apolitical assimilationists. Said is showing taking money off prostitutes, but this appears to be a personal foible rather than, as was more often the case, just one of the tactics – others include trafficking - used by the FLN to finance its campaigns. The messiness and paradoxes of revolutionary struggle,

prettified and shoehorned to reach a popular – perhaps even populist audience – are sucked away. Outside The Law ends up making the struggle it depicts appear destined for victory. That may have been a message that campaigners at the time used to advance their cause, but it's rarely the case in real life.

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