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MOVIE REVIEW

Outside the Law (2010)



Roger Arpajou/Studio Canal

From left, Jamel Debbouze, Sami Bouajila and Roschdy Zem in Rachid Bouchareb's "Outside the Law," a film about the Algerian struggle for independence.

Algerian Brothers Reunite in Paris, Outrage Still Burning

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

Published: November 2, 2010

"[Outside the Law](#)," Rachid Bouchareb's sweeping historical melodrama of [the Algerian struggle for independence](#), proceeds from a still-burning sense of outrage. With its mixture of righteous politics and family turmoil, this didactic, unashamedly manipulative film wants to be something like a cross between "[Army of Shadows](#)," [Jean-Pierre Melville's](#) 1969 classic of the French Resistance, and "[The Godfather](#)."

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Those are mighty shoes to fill, and as powerful and well made as it is, "Outside the Law" is too schematic and single-minded to lodge itself in your mind as a fully realized cinematic epic. Its few female characters are sketchy at best. It is all politics, all the time.

From that perspective, Mr. Bouchareb, whose acclaimed 2006 film, "[Days of Glory](#)" ("[Indigènes](#)"), tracked a group of World War II infantrymen from North Africa, uses every resource at his disposal to lend "[Outside the Law](#)" the clout of a heroic war movie and multigenerational family saga. But a certain humanity is missing. Some might describe "Outside the Law" as a historical revenge film.

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The 138-minute movie begins with an emotional sledgehammer: an inflammatory prologue set in 1925 in which the French Code de l'Indigénat is applied to a poor Algerian family, summarily evicted from its ancestral home to make room for French colonists. "This land was my father's! I was born here!" cries the patriarch (Ahmed Benaïssa), who can produce no documents to prove that the land is his.

The story leaps ahead 20 years for an even more infuriating scene. As France is celebrating V-E Day and the surrender of Nazi Germany, Algerian nationalist marchers in Sétif are massacred by French soldiers stationed on balconies and rooftops, who open fire without warning. These scenes of French colonial oppression are portrayed without any background or shading.

The film begins in earnest in 1954 in Paris, where the National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale, or F.L.N.), the guerrilla movement for Algerian independence, coalesces and gathers momentum. The organization is not only anti-French but also violently opposed to the more moderate Algerian National Movement.

For all its similarities to "Days of Glory," the new movie is not a sequel. ("Outside the Law," like its forerunner, is Algeria's Oscar nominee for the year's best foreign film.) **Jamel Debbouze**, Roschdy Zem and Sami Bouajila — the three principal actors — also appeared in "Days of Glory" but as different characters. Here they play the sons of the dispossessed farmer, who is later killed in the Sétif massacre.

The brothers — Saïd (Mr. Debbouze), who is seen as a little boy in the prologue; Abdelkader (Mr. Bouajila), who is later arrested for sedition and imprisoned; and Messaoud (Mr. Zem), who goes to Indochina to fight for the French cause — reunite in a shantytown in Nanterre, outside Paris.

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Rating

1. The Algerians did not choose to fight the Algerian War

It seems like the sins of the FLN are no worse than the sins of the Colonial French Institutions and they were only undertaken after several attempts to peacefully negotiate independence were ignored by the colonists in Algeria. The reality is that native algerians did not have any civil, voting or property rights and were dealt with harshly whenever they stepped out of line. This is the root of the violence. It is fine to complain that a historic film is manipulative and didactic but your attempt to call into question the rightness of the Algerian cause because you didn't like a film comes across as ignorant. Would you end a one-sided film about the French Resistance by calling into question the morality of their cause?

– *Kamal, Durham NC*



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