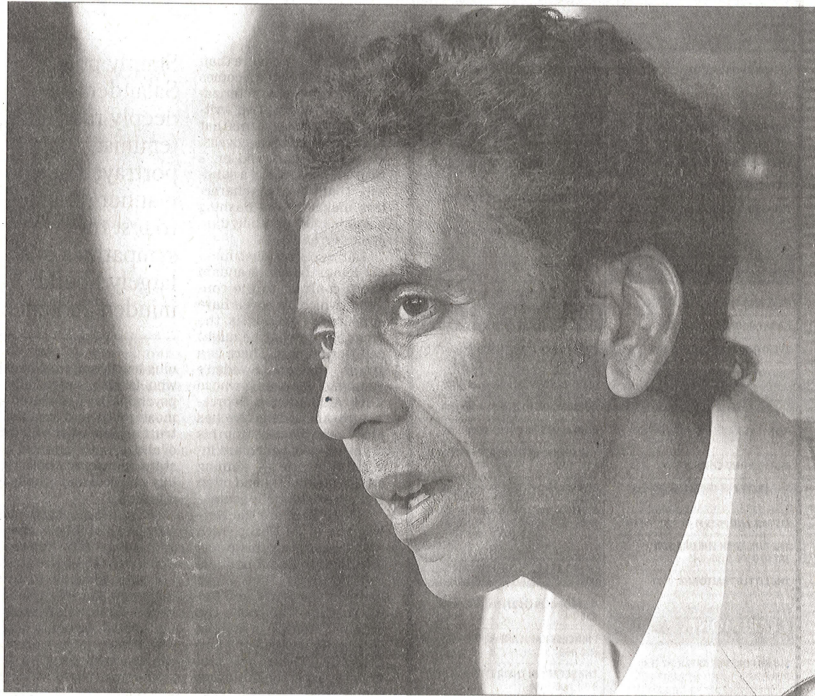


CANNES FILM FESTIVAL



PATRICIA WILLIAMS FOR THE TIMES

SETTING: Director Rachid Bouchareb makes effective use of events leading to Algerian independence.

Political stir precedes a compelling movie

Causing a furor before its screening, 'Outside the Law' then proves to be a potent piece of filmed entertainment.

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Films that cause a scandal after they are shown are business as usual for the Festival de Cannes. But something like "Outside the Law," a French-Algerian film that caused a complete furor before anyone had even seen it—that is something new.

It's not every film that is attacked by not one but two members of French Prime Minister Nicolas Sarkozy's political party who recommended that "Outside the Law" be pulled from the festival.

"I am not happy," said one legislator, "when a film denigrates France and the French military."

The situation got so tense that the festival took the unusual step of releasing an open letter from the film's director, Rachid Bouchareb, decrying the "acrimonious debate" and "reminding people that France is seen by the whole world as a land of liberty."

The politicians were displeased because "Outside the Law" begins with scenes of a notorious event in French-Algerian history, the French army's firing on pro-independence demonstrators in the Algerian city of Sétif on May 8, 1945, a situation that increasingly spiraled out of hand and led

over the next few days to the massacre of thousands of Algerians.

This event has increased resonance in the south of France, where many of the "pied-noirs," the French who made North Africa their home, settled after Algerian independence. Nite-Matin, the area's major paper, predicted a Cannes demonstration by 1,500 people and took the unexpected step of devoting its main front page headline to a story about "the film that enrages the pied-noirs." As a result, security was exceptionally tight at the festival's Friday screening, with bottles of water confiscated and each viewer subjected to an unusually thorough pat-down.

Once the film was screened, it turns out, not for the first time, that the politicians were dead wrong. Though it makes excellent use of the events leading to Algerian independence as a setting, "Outside the Law" is first and foremost a potent piece of filmed entertainment. Starring three of the four actors who starred in Bouchareb's Oscar-nominated "Days of Glory" as a trio of Algerian brothers who get caught up in the struggle for independence, this is a kind of "Once Upon a Time in the Revolution," a film that adroitly puts Hollywood epic style at the service of compelling Third World subject matter.

Painful memories

Bouchareb feels so strongly about this that when a questioner at the packed post-screening news conference began by complimenting him on his courage, the director immediately cut him short.

"It's not based on courage," he said. "I've simply made a film. These are painful memories for those who lived through it, but first and foremost this is a film. I don't want to talk to people who want to turn this film into a battleground."

Half an hour later, sitting quietly in an elegant space at the Palais des Festivals reserved for a filmmakers' lunch, Bouchareb reinforced this point, talking with passion about the films that inspired him, including the Marlon Brando-Elia Kazan "Viva Zapata," "The Godfather" and the works of Sergio Leone. He also pointed out that a key scene in the film, a conference between two implacable enemies, was inspired by a similar scene between Robert De Niro and Al Pacino in Michael Mann's "Heat."

Yet, as pleased as Bouchareb feels about how well "Outside the Law" was received, he is still troubled by the hostile reaction it received before anyone saw it.

"Now it's OK, but I was upset by the false rumor that it was anti-France," he said with feeling. "I was born in France, my kids were born in France. Those words were very hard."

Hard to take as well was how that hostility affected his Cannes experience.

"When I arrived, there were two security guards with guns. I couldn't go out, I had to stay in my hotel room, the movie was shown with big security," he said. "It's almost like I'm a hostage. I'm happy to be here, but it's difficult."

Though he understands where the hostility came from, Bouchareb thinks the people behind it miscalcu-

lated.

"When you touch on France's colonial past, the reaction is very violent, like a bomb," he explained. "Still, I was surprised when pressure was exerted against the film. These people had the old dream, that maybe it can be like 'Battle of Algiers' (which was banned in this country for five years), maybe they can stop the movie in France. But now a new generation has power, society has changed, they want to turn the page."

Epic in scope

Bouchareb, who co-wrote the screenplay, said the idea came to him while he researched "Days of Glory," which dealt with North African soldiers who fought for France in World War II.

"Veterans I met said that they were told many times that there would be freedom for their country at the end of the war," he said. "It was a big deception."

Though it is epic in scope, "Outside the Law" understands the terrible human toll the struggle for liberation took on the individuals who made it.

"You win the revolution, you are happy you have freedom, there is a big party. But after that, you think about your life, what you did," the filmmaker explained. "I met a man like this, a man whose job was 'kill.' He did it without thinking, but afterward his life changed, it was very difficult for him. He needed to do that in the revolution, but now, 50 years after, he says, 'I think every day, every night about my past.'"

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