



Days of Glory

Indigenes

(France - Morocco; Algeria - Belgium)

A Tessalit Prods., Kissfilms production, in co-production with France 3 Cinema, France 2 Cinema, StudioCanal (France)/Taza Prods. (Morocco)/Tassili (Algeria)/Versus Production, Scope Invest (Belgium), in association with La Petite Reine. (International sales: Films Distribution, Paris.) Produced by Jean Brehat. Co-producer, Jamel Debbouze. Executive producer, Muriel Merlin. Directed by Rachid Bouchareb. Screenplay by Olivier Morelle, Bouchareb.

Said - Jamel Debbouze

Yassir - Samy Naceri

Messaoud - Roschdy Zem

Abdelkader - Sami Bouajila

Martinez - Bernard Blancan

Leroux - Mathieu Simonet

Captain Durieux - Benoit Giros

By [JAY WEISSBERG](#)

France's baldly discriminatory attitude toward the North Africans who fought on her behalf in WWII finally gets brought to the screen in Rachid Bouchareb's emotionally charged though predictable war flick "Days of Glory." Big budgeted (\$16 million) multi-national production downplays its epic scale with a nicely-tuned ensemble that concentrates on personalities rather than battles, highlighting the contribution these men made despite treatment as second-class soldiers. Similar in this way to Edward Zwick's "Glory," pic's screenplay embraces too many standard-issue themes of injustice, but committed perfs and strong widescreen lensing carry the message with a righteous, if heavy weight.

Commercial prospects in Francophone territories are sky high, with likely cross-over to French-loving screens worldwide.



'Days of Glory' probes prejudice against North African troops in WWII.

Shifts in location are signaled by aerial B&W landscape shots slowly turning to color as clouds move past -- a nice, if overused device. It's the middle of the war, and recent Moroccan recruits are told they can raid the North African locals for food as long as they remember it's hands off once they reach France. As a group they're a poorly trained lot, but Corporal Abdelkader (Sami Bouajila) is convinced the French army is the only way toward equality with the colonial powers.

Sergeant Martinez (Bernard Blancan) thinks otherwise, quick to praise his men to his own superiors but never giving his unit an encouraging word. A baptism by fire in a hellish Italian battle teaches them more about war and duty than anything they were trained for, and Bouchareb musters an impressive array of extras, lensed like anonymous -- and disposable -- ants against the harsh rock face.

As the war continues and the North African soldiers are denied leave, their two-faced treatment -- necessary cogs in the war machine but undeserving of equal footing -- chafes at their sense of justice; Abdelkader reminds his superiors of their oath to the French Revolution's ideals, but Martinez, a self-loathing half-Arab who's passing as an Algerian of pure French origin won't acknowledge their rights.

When Abdelkader volunteers for a dangerous mission to Alsace, he does so in the belief it will get him a promotion, but audiences already understand that promises will be forgotten, and injustice will prevail.

As appealing as these characters are, the screenplay does them a disservice by making them mouthpieces with standard, issue-based personalities: Said (Jamel Debbouze) is the Uncle Tom, initially so pleased to be shown favor that he fails to object to being kept in the mud. Abdelkader is the freedom fighter, while Messaoud (Roschdy Zem) is the romantic, obsessing about returning to the Frenchwoman he met in Provence. A final coda at a war cemetery 60 years later is an especially unfortunate attempt to milk emotions in no need of further manipulation, no matter how just the cause.

The spicing standout is Bouajila ("Playing 'In the Company of Men'"), raging at all forms of injustice while maintaining a believable warmth and compassion that transfers beautifully for his duties as unit leader. Debbouze ("She Hate Me," "Amelie") manages to transform his role from simple-minded servant to angry soldier who still holds on to his humanity in spite of degradation, finding the real character beneath the stereotype.

Handsome widescreen lensing fulfills the epic nature of the war film genre but Bouchareb understands the necessity of keeping this drama centered on a human level. Location work in the North African mountains is particularly strong, and the sound department deserves praise for understanding the modulations required between battles and more intimate scenes.

Camera (color, B&W, widescreen), Patrick Blossier; editor, Yannick Kergoat; music, Armand Amar, Khaled; production designer, Dominique Douret; costume designer, Michele Richer; sound (Dolby Digital/DTS), Olivier Hespel, Olivier Walczak; Franck Rubio, Thomas Gauder; associate producer, Thomas Langmann; visual effects, L'Est; special effects, Les Versaillais; assistant director, Mathieu Schiffman; casting, Nora Habib. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (competing), May 25, 2006. Running time: 123 MIN.

With: Melanie Laurent, Antoine Chappey, Assaad Bouab.
(French, Arab dialogue)