



MICRO_SCOPE PRESENTS

MONSIEUR LAZHAR

A FILM BY PHILIPPE FALARDEAU

WITH FELLAG



tiff. toronto
international
film festival
OFFICIAL SELECTION 2011

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MONSIEUR LAZHAR

A FILM BY PHILIPPE FALARDEAU

WITH FELLAG / SOPHIE NÉLISSE / ÉMILIEN NÉRON
DANIELLE PROULX / BRIGITTE POUPART

PRODUCED BY LUC DÉRY & KIM McCRAW

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SYNOPSIS

In Montreal, an elementary school teacher dies abruptly. Having learned of the incident in the newspaper, Bachir Lazhar (Fellag), a 55-year-old Algerian immigrant, goes to the school to offer his services as a substitute teacher. Quickly hired to replace the deceased, he finds himself in an establishment in crisis, while going through his own personal tragedy.

The cultural gap between Bachir and his class is made immediately apparent when he gives them a dictation exercise that is beyond their reach. Little by little, Bachir learns to better know this group of shaken but endearing kids, among whom are Alice and Simon, two charismatic pupils particularly affected by their teacher's death. While the class goes through the healing process, nobody in the school is aware of Bachir's painful past; nor do they suspect that he is at risk of being deported at any moment.

Adapted from BASHIR LAZHAR, a play by Evelyne de la Chenelière, MONSIEUR LAZHAR depicts the encounter between two distant worlds and the power of self-expression. After CONGORAMA, and IT'S NOT ME, I SWEAR!, Philippe Falardeau returns to the socially engaged filmmaking that marked his beginnings with THE LEFT-HAND SIDE OF THE FRIDGE. Using great sensitivity and humor, the filmmaker follows a humble man who is ready to transcend his own loss in order to accompany children beyond the silence and taboo of death.

INTERVIEW WITH PHILIPPE FALARDEAU - *Monsieur Lazhar*



After IT'S NOT ME, I SWEAR!, MONSIEUR LAZHAR is your second film adaption of a literary work. What is it about this process that appeals to you?

I think I like adaptations because the work has already proved itself in its initial form, either on an emotional level for me or for the general public. One thing always worries me when I make a film: will I be able to live with this subject for a period of three or four years? Will it interest others as much as it interests me? It is equally important to understand the limits of one's medium and not try and reproduce what the original medium has done successfully. For IT'S NOT ME, I SWEAR!, it was clear that the humor found in Bruno Hébert's writing came from the discrepancy found in the naive narration of a 10-year-old child whose references are those of a 40 year old. For MONSIEUR LAZHAR, Evelyne de la Chenelière's play stages only one character. What particularly interested me was its evocative strength. I also knew it would be risky to try and emulate Evelyne's poetic style, simply because I'm not a poet like she is and film as a medium doesn't lend itself to poetry in the same way.

So it was Bachir's strength that interested you and allowed you to imagine the rest?

I liked the subject of the play and its intention straightaway. While watching, I immediately imagined the film: I saw the classroom, the children... Daniel Brière's touching and spare direction most likely helped me to visualize a cinematographic work. The character Alice existed slightly, Simon barely at all, and yet there was a whole story to invent. I knew there was room for creation. I also liked the fact that Bachir's tragic story of being an immigrant wasn't the central plot. He is confronted with something that is very concrete within the society where he has settled, but this confrontation could have occurred anywhere. The story had to be able to stand on its own merit, beyond the fact that he has gone through a traumatic event leading to his exile. It has an influence on what is going to happen, it makes him a foreigner who is going to upset our view of the world, but I still do not believe it is the subject of the film. During the play, I thought: "Here is a rich character." He's not a character that has just been invented making us wonder what could be his traits and features. Not at all. Bachir has his own backstory, his own history, even before the movie starts.

How did you work with Evelyne de la Chenelière?

From the moment she accepted that I adapt the play, it was understood that I would be the screenwriter. I asked her to help me uphold the character's integrity and to follow me step by step. I wanted her to make sure to bring me back in line each time I headed in a direction that would betray the character's essence. She also was my first reader, along with my producers. Whenever I hit a wall, because she is an extraordinarily skillful writer, she was able to come up with real ideas. Not necessarily concrete ideas for the film, but she always knew when there was an important moment at stake and she'd send me her reflections, articles to read... and that unblocked me. That made me want to write with someone because sometimes you think you're at an impasse, but in the end there is a door – you just don't see it. Evelyne also helped me to reach emotionally deeper places for the film.

It was also important for you that what Bachir was going through would be plausible.

I did a lot of research to get to that point. A year after having started the adaptation of the play, in May 2008, I went to Algiers to see where Bachir came from to try and understand why he would have left his country. I also wanted to see what a civil servant's life would be like there... I imagined something very elaborate, that isn't in the film, but which helped me to understand him. Long before, I had also visited several countries such as Syria, Libya, Egypt and Tunisia. I have believed for a longtime that this area provides a fertile ground for film subjects. When the Arab Spring arrived, for me, the timing was simultaneous with the film I had just completed. Why did Bachir come to Montreal? Because he didn't have the choice: even several years after the civil war, Algeria is still facing many problems.

But could the Bachir character have been from another country?

I think so; but then perhaps the problem would be the language. I had thought about Lebanon. The character had not only to master the French language, but also love it greatly. Because in my mind, the healing process happens through the act of speaking, teaching, loving the French language and reading. Algeria worked well because there are many intellectuals there, great writers... Once in a Quebec school, Bachir is caught in a system that he doesn't know and he has to search within himself to draw from what he was taught in his childhood. So his only reference is a French method of teaching that is considered old-fashioned. It shouldn't be forgotten that Bachir is a North African immigrant who is profoundly secular. This was a very conscious decision on my part. He represents the "Other", who is above all a man searching for solutions, not in religion or in morals, not even in his cultural references in the "ethnic" sense of the term, but in relation to teaching, to our common relationship with the French language and literature and then in the fundamental act of communication. There is also irony in the fact that he has come to teach in a former colony that has a particular relationship with the French language, while he also comes from a former French colony.

Why did you choose Fellag for the role of Bachir?

I knew from the start, unless a miracle happened, that we wouldn't be able to find an actor in Quebec, because there isn't a large enough community of Maghreb actors. Given the context of the story, I was partial to France and its abundance of fine actors... I had a few people in mind, but in the end I found them too "Parisian" for the role. It was Evelyne who led me to Fellag, because he had already given a public reading of her play in France. I didn't know him before, but it made sense because he himself had been exiled during the Algerian civil war. While he was in Tunisia, the authorities warned him not to return, as there was a fatwa against him. He has experienced what Bachir went through, and for me that gave him additional depth. Even if his one-man shows don't at all resemble the character in the film, he has a sensitivity and intelligence that greatly interested me. I liked him right away when we met. He was very familiar with the play, and after having read the screenplay he immediately wanted the role. Fellag is enormously generous and has a great authenticity. I'm very happy with what he did, which is at the other end of the spectrum from his usual work.

After IT'S NOT ME, I SWEAR!, was it your intention to work with child actors again?

The choice was really made because of the play. The problem that occurs when children play a central role in a movie, is that one always wonders if the film is for children or for the family - something that never happens when there are only adult characters. However in life, we never ask ourselves when a situation occurs if it is a child situation or an adult situation... It's just life. I think that I make films about life and that lends itself to there being children.



As a screenplay writer and director, you still have to adapt your working style to the children.

Of course, but I think in general it is similar to the way one adapts their style for different actors. One thing that is really different is when it comes to an adult, I never worry if he knows his lines. Also, the set has to be managed in a more playful and relaxed manner. Yet as far as the acting is concerned, I maintain that these children are capable of grasping the emotions at stake for their characters, that they will understand that it's a job, and that I am not asking them to be who they are in real life. It was a bit more difficult in *IT'S NOT ME, I SWEAR!* because the main character had a distinctive gift for repartee. This time, I tried to be less "adult" in my writing, even if the Alice character is particularly mature for her age. Obviously there are lines that are a bit my perspective through the words of a child. Generally speaking, there is a great deal of work done in preproduction and Félix Ross, the acting coach who ran the children's workshops with me, must be thanked. She understands exactly in what direction I want to go, and without her I would never have made it.

The class and the school are shown in a very realistic manner.

Contrary to Evelyne, who has the ability to invent something from nothing, I need to recycle. I started my career with *LA COURSE DESTINATION MONDE* (a Canadian television show where young filmmakers were invited to travel to different regions of the world and make short documentary films) and my reference point in cinema is observation. I have a strong interest in films such as those by Ken Loach or Mike Leigh, for example. Their characters are clearly drawn from reality, or at least they are anchored in something that is naturalistic, which is my preference. Before making *MONSIEUR LAZHAR*, I spent several weeks in primary schools to see, for example, how a child fidgets in his seat... My art director, Emmanuel Fréchette, also conducted extraordinary research in a dozen or so schools in order to decorate ours. What is seen on the walls has been pieced together: all the artwork comes from children's work gathered in real schools. As with *THE LEFT-HAND SIDE OF THE FRIDGE*, which in the beginning was supposed to be a documentary, I was very happy, with *MONSIEUR LAZHAR*, to return to a universe where I needed to document things. It's fiction, but I work from a mixture of people I've known, I've seen or with whom I've spoken, and all of a sudden it all fleshes out. For me, film is a medium that is anchored in reality, unlike literature. I'm interested in life, especially in a film that claims to reflect a certain reality. This wasn't my main interest for *IT'S NOT ME, I SWEAR!*, but this time it was.

Is it also a film about mourning?

It's not a film about mourning, but rather a film about the complex organic entity that is a school. There is inevitably a healing process, but what particularly interested me was that the mourning process is taking place within the context

of an encounter between an immigrant and us. And so the school is going to work through this tragedy thanks to a "free electron," a foreigner who is also going through his own mourning process. Therefore, I like to think the film is rather a response to pervading views on how to integrate immigrants. As far as I'm concerned, there isn't a "how." Let's live together with the immigrant, in everything we may experience: eat, drink, laugh, work, live... and overcome hardships together. That's what integration is; it isn't anything else. It's not a matter of establishing policies.

But there is also another dimension quite dear to me that surfaced in the film, although it wasn't in the play. It's the entire question of the codification of relationships between children and adults in schools. Over the years, we have established rules that forbid adults from touching children, no matter what the circumstances, even if it is just to "put sunscreen on their back," as the gym teacher character comments. We very well understand the reasons behind these rules and what's at stake with them. But the result is that teachers, parents and even the children walk on eggs whenever it comes to showing a certain form of affection or closeness. The question is extremely delicate and constitutes a pivotal moment in the film. I think the film speaks a great deal about this, imperceptibly at first, until the end where the subject matter becomes explicit.

During the entire film, Bachir is someone who remains strong and dignified...

Qualities that often characterize immigrants. He is discreet when it comes to himself. Bachir feels that it isn't relevant to put his emotions or his pain on display. In a world where communicating emotions is highly encouraged, he chooses to keep his to himself. And in my opinion, that is a mistake. Especially with his colleague Claire, among others. At the same time, it's what gives his character dignity: he is much more interested in helping the class work through and free themselves from their grief; so he ignores his own. But unconsciously, I think he pushes Alice and Simon because he wants to push himself. Simon is the child who carries all of the school's guilt. In the end, when he yields to the emotion, the tension felt by the entire school is released.

Even if the film is dramatic, and the subject is serious, there are humorous elements throughout...

Rarely in life does tragedy or drama come alone. It's often a question of perspective... In *IT'S NOT ME, I SWEAR!*, the humor was built on distance, an off-beat, indeed at times absurd humor. In *MONSIEUR LAZHAR*, the humor is more subtle, more down-to-earth. The Algerian character's naivety surprises us and makes us laugh. When a cultural gap is subtly played upon, there is always a rich potential for humor. The maintenance man and the gym teacher constantly have odd and direct lines that make you laugh. You must understand that, strictly speaking, there aren't any gags. It's simply that life is comical and I think we should realize it. For me, films with no humor at all are science-fiction. It just can't be!



DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

After studying Canadian politics at University of Ottawa and International relations at University Laval in Quebec City, Philippe Falardeau was chosen as a contestant for the 1993 edition of the television series **LA COURSE DESTINATION MONDE** (a contest where the participants tour the world making short films). While there, he directs 20 films and ends up winning the race as well as the *IDRC Award* (International Development Research Center of Canada). In 1995, he collaborates with director Jacques Godbout to co-write *Le Sort de l'Amérique*, a National Film Board of Canada documentary.

Two years later, he returns to the National Film Board to direct a medium length documentary on Chinese immigration in Canada called **PÂTÉ CHINOIS**. The film is presented at the Montreal World Film Festival and wins *Best Screenplay Award* at the Yorkton Film Festival. In 2000, Philippe Falardeau directs his first theatrical feature film, **LA MOITIÉ GAUCHE DU FRIGO** (The Left-Hand Side of the Fridge). The film was a big success in Canada and screened in numerous festivals around the world including Rotterdam, London, Paris, Seattle, Vancouver and Montreal. *La Moitié gauche du frigo* wins the *Citytv Award for Best Canadian First Feature* at the Toronto Film Festival, and the *Claude Jutra Award* at the Genie Awards ceremony. In France, the film was released theatrically by Pierre Grise Distribution.

With **CONGORAMA**, released in 2006, Philippe Falardeau offers us his second feature film, a Canada-Belgium-France coproduction. It is his first collaboration with *micro_scope*, the producers of *Incendies*. Distributed theatrically in Quebec as in Europe, the film also distinguishes itself at the numerous festivals where it is presented. After premiering at the Director's Fortnight in Cannes, as the closing night film, **CONGORAMA** makes its way to festivals in Munich, Namur, Toronto, New York (New Directors/New Films), Pusan and Göteborg Film Festivals. In addition to earning 5 Jutra Awards, including *Best Film*, *Best Direction* and *Best Screenplay*, the film also wins *Best Screenplay* at the Genie Awards in 2007.

C'EST PAS MOI, JE LE JURE! (IT'S NOT ME, I SWEAR !), his third feature film, was adapted from a Bruno Hébert's novels. The world premiere of the film screens in the Generation section and wins the prestigious *Chrystal Bear* and *Deutsche Kinderhilfswerk Grand Prix Award*. **C'EST PAS MOI, JE LE JURE !** also wins the *Grand Prix Award of the Écrans Juniors* section at the 2009 edition of the Cannes Film Festival. After over 60 invitations on the world festival circuit, the film is sold in about 40 countries. In Canada, the film is consecrated as Best Canadian Film at the Halifax Film Festival and by the Vancouver Film Critics Award.

MONSIEUR LAZHAR, an adaptation of the stage play *Bashir Lazhar* by Evelyne de la Chenelière, is his fourth feature film.



EVELYNE DE LA CHENELIÈRE AUTHOR OF THE STAGE PLAY *BASHIR LAZHAR*

Evelyne de la Chenelière studied Modern literature at the Sorbonne and then went on to study theater at Michel-Granvale school in Paris. As an author and actress, she wrote several plays which were presented in Quebec as well as in Europe, and translated into several languages. As we think of *Strawberries in January*, *Au bout du fil*, *Henri et Margaux*, *Aphrodite en 04*, *L'Héritage de Darwin*, *Bashir Lazhar*, and *Le plan américain* (Best play at the Saarbrücken Scoops Festival in Germany in 2009), her creation is an accurate observation of the human nature.

In 2006, she received the Literary prize of the Governor General of Canada for *Désordre Public*. In 2009, the play *Les pieds des anges* was a part of the programming season at Espace GO theater and was also nominated for the Governor General's Literary Awards (2009) and Grand Prize of dramatic literature. Her play *L'imposture* was presented at the Théâtre du Nouveau Monde in 2009.

Evelyne de la Chenelière was singled out by the regretted Jean-Pierre Ronfard and worked many times under his direction for the Nouveau Théâtre Expérimental where she is still creating regularly in tandem with her partner Daniel Brière. Their recent creation *Ronfard, nu devant son miroir*, was presented in March 2011 at l'Espace Libre.

Evelyne de la Chenelière also acted in the feature films *Le Colis* by Gaëlle D'Ynglemare, *Café de Flore* by Jean-Marc Vallée and of the latest feature film from Philippe Falardeau, *Bashir Lazhar*, a film adaptation of her own play.

In March 2011, Evelyne de la Chenelière published her first novel *La concordance des temps* at L'émeac Editions.



CAST

Bachir Lazhar
Alice
Simon
Mrs Vaillancourt
Claire
Janitor
Gaston
Mrs Dumas
Audrée
Abdelmalek
Marie-Frédérique
Boris
Victor
Commissionner
Me Gilbert Danis
Marie-Frédérique's father
Alice's mother
Prosecutor
Psychologist

FELLAG
Sophie NÉLISSE
Émilien NÉRON
Danielle PROULX
Brigitte POUPART
Louis CHAMPAGNE
Jules PHILIP
Francine RUEL
Sophie SANSCARTIER
Seddik BENSLIMANE
Marie-Eve BEAUREGARD
Louis-David LEBLANC
Vincent MILLARD
André ROBITAILLE
Daniel GADOUAS
Stéphane DEMERS
Evelyne de la CHENELIÈRE
Marie CHARLEBOIS
Nico LAGARDE

CREW

Writer / Director
Based on the stage play of
Producers

Director of photography
Editor
Production designer
Costume designer
Sound

Original score
Line producer
Post-production supervisor
1st assistant director
Casting

Production
International sales

Philippe FALARDEAU
Evelyne DE LA CHENELIÈRE
Luc DÉRY
Kim McCRAW
Ronald PLANTE csc
Stéphane LAFLEUR
Emmanuel FRÉCHETTE
Francesca CHAMBERLAND
Pierre BERTRAND
Mathieu BEAUDIN
Sylvain BELLEMARE
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