

An interview with Philippe Faucon, director of *Dans la vie*

David Walsh
4 October 2007

David Walsh spoke to Philippe Faucon during the Toronto film festival.

David Walsh: Could you explain a little about the origins of the idea for the film?

Philippe Faucon: I wrote this film with several other people. One of them, to whom I'm married, is also Algerian. We began working on this film around 2003, which was a moment when we noticed around us in France the phenomenon of the turning inward of communities, an atmosphere of tension, principally between the Jewish and North African communities, linked to the events in the Middle East, events which had their repercussions in France—there was violence, friction.

So, we had the idea for this film beginning from the stories told by Yasmina [Nini-Faucon], because she had previously been a nurse and she remembered people whom she had visited or cared for, which inspired in part the character of Esther. On the other hand, the character of Halima, the woman of Algerian origin, was developed from various things, reactions that we noticed around us. So, by these means we developed the idea of an encounter between these two characters, and the one ending up living with the other for a short period of time.

It seemed to me this permitted us to depict an encounter between these two people, which had from the beginning both something which opposed one to the other and something which brought them together. *Voilà....*

At the moment when we were writing the scenario in 2003, we were affected by the events in the Occupied Territories; by the time we had assembled the means to shoot the film and we had begun our preparations for the film, the war in Lebanon broke out just at that moment. And so we situated the film in the exact context in which we were shooting.

DW: I assume the performers were all non-professionals.

PF: They are all non-professionals. That is to say, it seemed to me to play this type of character, from a very working class milieu [*"un milieu très populaire"*], there were not in France the actors who had the social and cultural closeness to these people. One doesn't find such people in the actors' agencies. One finds actresses who belong to other social and cultural layers, and so, they have, despite everything, something that doesn't fit. And while choosing performers from among non-professionals was a bit of a difficult, complicated choice, it seemed that it was the only means to achieve accuracy and an authenticity in the interpretation of these characters.

I already directed, in *Samia* [2000], a cast that was entirely non-professional. But *Samia* was done with younger people, who had seen films, who watched films every day, who watch DVDs, who had grown up in an environment of computers, IT, videos. So, in two or three days, they were able to catch on to all the technical requirements of acting before a camera.

But with older people, it was less obvious. And here, we are talking of two women over 60 years of age, so it was not so easy. Because the rhythm of shooting is very physical, very hard.... It was not necessarily easy, but they had a great commitment to the project. They were both very gripped by this story, this project that interested them very much at the

level of their own histories—and so they brought an enormous amount to the roles, and they made these characters in the scenario exist, I think, in a very beautiful and strong fashion.

DW: I would imagine that the dignity of these two women was a very important question for you. There is a certain "indignity," or perceived indignity, in both their conditions. One is in a wheelchair....

PF: Yes. There are a number of things that make one of them [Halima] a person looked down on, ill-considered, an immigrant woman, a woman who did not go to school very much, who has a very difficult life....

There are a number of elements like that, which make, in France, the population of North African origin identify themselves with the conditions of the Palestinians. They have a sentiment themselves of being victimized, of being second-class citizens, of injustice, of being ghettoized. And so there is this strong identification with the cause of the Palestinians. This is clearly true among the young people, but among the older ones, too, and sometimes among the women, who are particularly sensitive to what is occurring in the Middle East, which they compare to what is happening to their children in France.

So, it's a matter of restoring these two characters, who are capable of a certain weakness, but who also possess a certain grandeur and strength. It was essential not to caricature them, it was necessary to render their human complexity which often one actually finds in such people.

These are people who are often absent from the screen, because cinema is less interested in them. It is no easy matter to make a film with non-professionals. Today, the cinema wants well-known actors, attractive people, the people who are talked about in the magazines....

DW: You were born in Morocco, I believe. What was the situation of your family?

PF: My parents met in Morocco. My mother was born in Algeria. Her family had themselves immigrated, from Spain. They came to Algeria because there was work. My grandfather was a miner who left Spain because there were mines in Algeria. I was born in Morocco, my mother in Algeria, but on the two sides of the border there's a mining region and people pass from one side to the other, when there is work, sometimes illegally.

So, my mother was not French and she became French when she met my father, who was a young soldier sent to Algeria, Morocco. So my mother when she was a child knew a little bit of this life comparable to that of immigrants when they come to France, or anywhere else. She didn't speak French, she was somewhat on the sidelines.

DW: What did your parents think of the situation in Algeria in the 1950s and 1960s?

PF: It's complicated. There was a situation of a great injustice *vis à vis* the Arabs which resulted in a war that placed the Europeans against the Muslims. The lines of separation between people were transformed into ethnic separation. There were divisions that were more social divisions, a bit like what's happening in the Middle East today. People considered that they belonged to one camp as a result of their ethnic roots, while in

reality my mother did not go to school with the little French girls, but rather with the little Algerians.

So, for her it was something very troubling, that is to say, she had to leave Algeria, she didn't like France at all, or the French, she felt much closer to the Arabs. But between them there was the war, with all its violence, killings and reprisals. It's a very tragic history. It's comparable in some ways to the situation of the Israelis and the Palestinians today.

DW: There have been a number of films about the Algerian war and related subjects recently in France. Could you perhaps discuss this phenomenon?

PF: There is a belated return to these issues. How is to be explained? I don't know. In the US, for example, they addressed the Vietnam war very soon after the end of the war, almost before the end of the war. In France, this did not take place. I don't know why, during the war itself there was censorship, which was very important, in the 1960s. There were a few films about the Algerian war, but it was very complicated because the producers took the risk that the films would be banned.

After the war, right after the war, perhaps France wanted to forget the war, to turn the page. Now there is return of this repressed issue. Recently, in the past three, four, five years, all of a sudden, there are the testimonies of individuals who have reached the age of 60 or 70 or older and who now have suddenly unburdened themselves of stories they never told before. When they came back from Algeria, no one wanted to hear their stories, they kept quiet, they kept it to themselves, for 20, 30, 40 years. They returned from Algeria, they forgot it themselves, they began families, they kept their stories to themselves.

There have been a certain number of testimonies that have appeared, and films based on them.

DW: It seems to me a healthy tendency. To clarify questions.

PF: Yes, yes, I think so.

DW: Was the shooting of this film a different experience?

PF: Yes, because it was done with older people, as I explained before, it was more complicated. It was also a film that I produced, for the first time. So it was quite a load. When one becomes the producer, one has control of the finances, expenses, one gains a certain freedom. On the other hand, it is a heavy burden to carry. One is no longer concentrated fully on the artistic issues of the film, but also on the money issues, of production. It is interesting, it's fine, but it's a lot of responsibility.

It was a film difficult to make, but fascinating, because the two women gave so much of themselves.

DW: What do you think of the present state of French cinema?

PF: There are interesting people in the French cinema today. However, there is a tendency, more and more, of the spectacle, due to the competition with American cinema, which is very strong.... Independent films, personal films, become more and more difficult. To make films outside the criteria of the system is a bit more difficult. At the same time, France remains a country where one tries still to preserve a cinema of *auteurs*, so the state still maintains a policy of support to the independent cinema.

But the gap is growing larger now between the commercial films, which are made with more and more money, with bigger and bigger budgets, and independent films. The gap is growing wider between the dominant system and independent films. People can make films with small resources, without anything, because it's now possible with digital technology, but these are films with little distribution, apart from the Internet or something like that.

DW: Sincerity, honesty, the truth of everyday life are very difficult to achieve in cinema.

PF: Those who make the decisions think people want to see things above the ordinary, the every day, that people don't go to the cinema to see everyday life. So, films treat people who don't live the majority of humanity. They believe this is what the public demands, but this isn't

what the public demands. They don't give people anything else, and don't give to other material the possibility of having a place on the screens. The big films are distributed in 800 copies, this does not leave any room for anything else.

When *La Trahison* [Faucon's previous film] came out in France, there was a French comedy...effectively, this was a film that occupied all the screens. A film like *La Trahison*, or a film from an African country, has hardly any place, perhaps for two or three weeks, it's hardly visible.

There is a desire for something else. When people can encounter this other type of film, in my experience, each time they stay after the screening, they talk for a long time, they ask questions. Simply, these films are not visible. Today, for a film to be visible it must have an enormous advertising budget, the actors or director must be invited to appear on television shows, in prime time, and the television networks are not interested in the performers, for example, like those in *Dans la vie*.

Such films are visible at present only to those who follow the cinema, who know when they are coming out, despite the absence of advertising, overkill on television. A film like *Dans la vie* exists only through the press, the critics. For the general public, they are visible only for a little bit of time. It's a catastrophe in France.

DW: There has been a concerted effort to whip up divisions between the ethnic communities in France. What is the present atmosphere?

PF: There seems to be a return to a demand for law and order, expressed in the ascent of Sarkozy. That is characteristic of every period of crisis. When the crisis becomes extreme, it pushes people toward the extremes. It provokes this tendency to turn inward on oneself, to demand security. In France, this is very obvious. Often it is on the order of the unreal, it is very bizarre. There is a sense of insecurity that does not always correspond to reality.

Television is very strong, it's a tool of quasi-manipulation, of fabrication. One can instigate a climate, a sentiment which amplifies the fears and insecurities.

There is an absence of political alternative, a loss of confidence by people in politics.

DW: Including in the so-called "left."

PF: Yes, yes.

DW: Which directors do you admire?

PF: The directors who influenced me, at the beginning, included people like Maurice Pialat, John Cassavetes. The directors today who interest me often work alone, who shoot their films with difficulty, not regularly....



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