

Toronto International Film Festival 2012

Interview with Damien Ounouri, director of *Fidaï*, and Mohamed El Hadi Benadouda

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*During the Toronto film festival, I organized an interview with Damien Ounouri, director of *Fidaï*, a thought-provoking documentary about the Algerian revolution and its consequences. The subject of that film is Ounouri's great-uncle, Mohamed El Hadi Benadouda, born in 1940 and a veteran of the Algerian struggle against French colonialism.*

I was somewhat surprised and certainly pleased that Ounouri brought his great-uncle along to the interview at a King Street West location. Both men proved to be intelligent and gracious.

David Walsh: The Algerian revolution [1954-1962] is one of the great and complex events of the postwar period. How did this film, *Fidaï*, come about?

Damien Ounouri: The story begins with my father, in fact. When I was little, my father told me the story of his uncle who fought in the Algerian revolution, but he didn't know the whole story, because his uncle had never told him all the details. So, my father told us, you have an uncle in Algeria, who fought for Algerian independence, who was arrested by the French police and went to prison.

I was satisfied to have a sort of hero in the family. I was born in France, my father was Algerian, my mother French. My great-uncle lived in Algeria, so I had never seen him. Later, in the 1990s, when I wasn't even 10, he came on a visit. I was fascinated by him, someone very calm, modest. I could tell that he done big things during the war.

I studied film theory, and then I educated myself in film practice. I began to make documentary films that always dealt with the question of memory. I made one about the Chinese director Jia Zhangke [*Platform*, *The World*, *Still Life*]. After that film, in China, I was thinking more about locations and the facts related to them. I decided it was the moment to go to Algeria and make a film about my great-uncle.

I called him and explained who I was. I told him I made films now and asked him if he would agree to tell his story. He said all right.

Being in Algeria also involved a bit of discovering my own origins. And, for his part, my great-uncle had the desire to convey his story, because even our family did not know it. For me, this is more than a personal story, because he represents the majority of ordinary combatants, this group of worker-combatants who had carried out the revolution. So in the film I would examine the Algerian revolution, but through the figure of an individual, in a very personal way.

DW: Was this the first time your great-uncle had the opportunity to explain his history?

DO: Yes, it was. This was the first time you told your story?

Mohamed El Hadi Benadouda: The first time, yes. I had spoken about my participation in the revolution, that I was imprisoned, but I had never given the details.

DW: May I ask why?

MEHB: I don't know, I don't know. To explain to my children that I had committed a crime, that...

DW: I understand.

DO: I waited to the end of the filming to ask why he had agreed to do the film and why he had given me his confidence. He said you are the son of my nephew, why shouldn't I give you my confidence? In regard to his concerns about saying he had killed someone, he was afraid I would see him as a terrorist and not understand why he'd done it.

DW: His own family did not know some of this story?

DO: No, they simply knew that he had been part of the FLN [National Liberation Front, the Algerian independence movement] and that he had been in prison. But no one knew the details. He told me the date of when he had carried out the "settling of accounts," and I looked in the local press and I found the news article.

DW: Why were you so insistent, almost obsessively so, on getting your uncle to physically reenact the events?

DO: Why did I keep asking him to redo this, to redo that? I am very interested in the word connected to the given locality. This is not something I invented.

I think it provides a more sensuous memory. We could have made a film in Algeria, based on talking about his memories. But it interested me more to return to the locales in France, to

touch the walls. But even then, when we arrived at certain locations and he told me the facts, it was still a bit static. I said, show me the movements, the actions, because the body also has a memory. The gestures brought back the memories. I questioned him and questioned him, to get the maximum of details to return.

I handed him a gun so the experience would return. And at a certain moment, I said, I'll play the guy you were supposed to kill. You direct me, tell me where to go, what to do. And we did the scene in real time almost in silence. We're playing here on the boundary between fiction and documentary. There is no absolute wall between them. There are moments that are interchangeable between the two forms. The filmmakers I admire, Jia Zhangke, [Abbas] Kiarostami, are the ones who work between the two.

So I was hoping, while starting with something wholly documentary, the facts, the situation, to arrive—a little anxiously—at something near fictional, with traveling shots and so forth. And then in the editing, to mix those.

I know I was a bit hard on my uncle, making him go over and over it. I was trying to do something like *Last Year at Marienbad* [directed by Alain Resnais, 1961], trying to make the memories come back. In the end, we had to cut the scene in two, it was too much. I think it was a bit painful for my uncle. When I looked at the rushes, I had two hours, two and a half hours of film, it made me unhappy, because his face...

DW: Can I ask, what motivated you to join the revolution?

MEHB: When I was young, I was an agricultural worker. During the independence struggle, I saw the French army do bad things. They killed people. They destroyed the crops, they burned people's houses. If the French military were unable to find the *mujahedeen* [FLN fighters], they took it out on the civilians.

When I was 15 or so, there was an incident, in July or August, in the middle of the town, on the main street. The military arrived in a jeep. They parked in front of a café, and they opened fire, they machine-gunned the men sitting inside. I was close to the place. These things made an impression.

DO: Memory was one subject in my film, the other was commitment. Why does a young man of 18, a peasant, not from a political background, commit himself like that to a cause? Why is he ready to sacrifice his life? In Algeria, I wanted to figure out what he had felt and experienced, so that later in France, he joined...he committed himself without hesitation. He preferred to die rather than live like that.

DW: Can you imagine making that sort of sacrifice today?

DO: Me? In thinking about his commitment, I thought about my own too. For my generation, I'm 30, I think it's a bit more difficult to find one's place, the struggles are not the same...and there's the individualism, materialism. It's difficult to find the same sort of commitments as in the 1960s and 1970s. Vietnam,

the civil rights movement, etc. For me at the moment, I'm dedicated to filmmaking. But I think, that it's always necessary to sacrifice, to commit oneself for the right reason.

DW: What is the situation in Algeria for the working class? What are the social conditions?

DO: I don't live in Algeria, so I don't know them really well, but life is very expensive, prices have risen, for basic necessities. Life is difficult. But there are a handful of people who are doing very well. There is an elite, you see them shopping in Paris. They have made money in energy, oil.

It is important as well to think about the revolution 50 years afterward. An Algerian historian has spoken about a "confiscated revolution." This is something that has happened in all the Arab countries. Authoritarian regimes are in power. In 1962, those in the FLN who didn't agree were killed or expelled.

DW: I'm not putting a question mark over the anti-colonial revolution, but there was not a *social* revolution in Algeria, you still have capitalism, an elite. What are the results of the revolution, 50 years later?

MEHB: It's similar as under colonialism, in terms of inequality. The same inequalities...

DO: Why didn't you encourage your children to pursue politics?

MEHB: My children were more educated than me. It wasn't for me to tell them what to do.

DO: My father was very much on the left, a worker at Michelin. He worked in the factory for 40 years, he was never promoted. There was still discrimination. That's why he gave me a French first name. But our family was very socialist, communist. We were raised with the values of justice, equality, sharing—that's the left, I think.

DW: Is the Algerian revolution studied, are the events well known in Algeria?

MEHB: Not very well, no. In school, they talk about it. But the old ones, like me, they don't talk about it much. Between themselves maybe they tell the truth.

DO: The true story of the revolution is not told. Many things are concealed, or kept from people. Many of the conflicts and divisions within the movement, many of the complications.

DW: A final word. It is an honor for me to meet a veteran of the Algerian revolution.

MEHB: Thank you.



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