

## Dossier pédagogique A peine j'ouvre les yeux

### Partie en anglais ( se référer au dossier français pour l'utilisation)

Tunis, summer 2010, a few months before the Revolution: Farah, 18 years-old, has just graduated and her family already sees her as a future doctor. But she doesn't think the same way. She sings in a political rock band. She has a passion for life, gets drunk, discovers love and her city by night against the will of her mother Hayet, who knows Tunisia and its dangers too well.

Rottentomatoes.com

This music-filled, French-Tunisian production is set in Tunis, summer 2010, a few months before the Revolution, and depicts the clash between culture and family as seen through the eyes of a young Tunisian woman balancing the traditional expectations of her family with her creative life, as the singer in a politically charged rock band. Director Leyla Bouzid's feature offers a nuanced portrait of the implications of the Arab Spring on the lives of young people in the region, while also creating a complex story about a young woman using art to transform her reality.

Rogerebert.com

This political/cultural dimension is indeed interesting and noteworthy, but the way it's presented here makes "As I Open My Eyes" feel like two films rather oddly stitched together. For much of its length, it's a coming-of-age tale that has Tunisian characters but feels like the standard French type (Bouzid studied filmmaking in Paris and French literature at the Sorbonne). Then, in the last act, political paranoia and revolutionary ferment burst into the story, and a different sort of film emerges.

Bouzid centers her story on 18-year-old Farah (Baya Medhaffer), a middle-class girl torn between her mother and her boyfriend and the two life paths they represent. Hayet (Ghalia Benali), her mom, is a kindly but very practical sort, and she's understandably thrilled that her daughter's been accepted to medical school. Farah, though, sings in a band—one of Patti Smith's album covers hangs in her bedroom—and that's the more romantic road associated with her boyfriend Bohrène (Montassar Ayari).

Not surprisingly, Farah devotes more time to her band and Bohrène than to mom. The band (which performs songs by Iraqi musician Khyam Allami) seems off to a strong start, and the same might said of Farah's first big romance. The passion is new and obviously exhilarating. After making love, she kicks the sheet off Bohrène, saying she wants to see what a man's penis looks like. (One wonders if this scene could be shown in Tunisia, or if it indicates the extent to which the film is meant for foreign viewers.)

Curiously, there's virtually no mention of religion in the film. For that matter, politics creep into the tale only obliquely, and later. It appears we're meant to understand that the band's music and

Farah's lyrics have an edge of protest, but this is registered only as a very general sort of frustration and discontent.

This reviewer was in Tunisia during the time the film depicts and remembers the repressive atmosphere and sense of omnipresent surveillance prior to the popular uprising and the flight of the dictator Ben Ali. Again, though, there's practically no discussion of politics anywhere in the film. This element enters the story only in the last act, when the band begins to think that one of its members is a police informant, and then Farah disappears into the Kafkaesque grip of the state security apparatus.

The latter event occasions the film's two strongest scenes. In one, Farah's mom takes her to a crowded bus station and manages to buy her the last ticket on an inter-city bus, but then Farah's goes off to buy a drink and never returns. The mother's frantic search through the station for her missing child has a pulse of Hitchcockian dread. The other scene, which comes soon after, shows Farah's interrogation by two policemen. It's done in a single take and is harrowing enough for a Costa-Gavras film.

These scenes show that Bouzid has real filmmaking talent, as do the strong performances she gets out of newcomer Medhaffer as Farah and Benali as her mother. When these two are in top form at the story's climax, it makes you wish a strong producer had induced Bouzid to toss the coming-of-age clichés and focus the entire film on the nascent political drama that makes its latter third so much more compelling than the rest.

This political/cultural dimension is indeed interesting and noteworthy, but the way it's presented here makes "As I Open My Eyes" feel like two films rather oddly stitched together. For much of its length, it's a coming-of-age tale that has Tunisian characters but feels like the standard French type (Bouzid studied filmmaking in Paris and French literature at the Sorbonne). Then, in the last act, political paranoia and revolutionary ferment burst into the story, and a different sort of film emerges.

Bouzid centers her story on 18-year-old Farah (Baya Medhaffer), a middle-class girl torn between her mother and her boyfriend and the two life paths they represent. Hayet (Ghalia Benali), her mom, is a kindly but very practical sort, and she's understandably thrilled that her daughter's been accepted to medical school. Farah, though, sings in a band—one of Patti Smith's album covers hangs in her bedroom—and that's the more romantic road associated with her boyfriend Bohrène (Montassar Ayari).

Not surprisingly, Farah devotes more time to her band and Bohrène than to mom. The band (which performs songs by Iraqi musician Khyam Allami) seems off to a strong start, and the same might said of Farah's first big romance. The passion is new and obviously exhilarating. After making love, she kicks the sheet off Bohrène, saying she wants to see what a man's penis looks like. (One wonders if this scene could be shown in Tunisia, or if it indicates the extent to which the film is meant for foreign viewers.)

Curiously, there's virtually no mention of religion in the film. For that matter, politics creep into the tale only obliquely, and later. It appears we're meant to understand that the band's music and

Farah's lyrics have an edge of protest, but this is registered only as a very general sort of frustration and discontent.

This reviewer was in Tunisia during the time the film depicts and remembers the repressive atmosphere and sense of omnipresent surveillance prior to the popular uprising and the flight of the dictator Ben Ali. Again, though, there's practically no discussion of politics anywhere in the film. This element enters the story only in the last act, when the band begins to think that one of its members is a police informant, and then Farah disappears into the Kafkaesque grip of the state security apparatus.

The latter event occasions the film's two strongest scenes. In one, Farah's mom takes her to a crowded bus station and manages to buy her the last ticket on an inter-city bus, but then Farah's goes off to buy a drink and never returns. The mother's frantic search through the station for her missing child has a pulse of Hitchcockian dread. The other scene, which comes soon after, shows Farah's interrogation by two policemen. It's done in a single take and is harrowing enough for a Costa-Gavras film.

These scenes show that Bouzid has real filmmaking talent, as do the strong performances she gets out of newcomer Medhaffer as Farah and Benali as her mother. When these two are in top form at the story's climax, it makes you wish a strong producer had induced Bouzid to toss the coming-of-age clichés and focus the entire film on the nascent political drama that makes its latter third so much more compelling than the rest.

Variety.com

A headstrong young woman in Tunisia bucks her parents and her repressive society in Leyla Bouzid's impressive debut.

On the eve of Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution, a young woman struggles against family and society to pursue a singing career in Leyla Bouzid's impressive, generally nuanced debut, "As I Open My Eyes." Sharply yet subtly capturing the atmosphere of fear fostered by the dictatorship of President Ben Ali, this skillfully made drama is especially attuned to the myriad forms of surveillance, from the prurient to the political. Showcasing a stand-out lead perf by first-timer Baya Medhaffer, with intriguing compositions by Iraqi musician Khyam Allami, "Eyes" will open eyes to several new talents and could see a small international rollout.

There's an appealing youthfulness about the film: the characters' ages, of course, and the indie music, but also the fluid lensing and the irresistible freshness of Medhaffer's slightly pouty face, her fixed determination giving character to doll-like features. The actress plays Farah, an aspiring thrush in a new band about to perform their first gig. The young woman has just graduated with honors, and everyone expects her to go on to study medicine, but she's more interested in musicology.

That doesn't sit well with mom Hayet (singer Ghalia Benali), once a free spirit herself but now determined to do everything she can to "protect" her daughter from making wrong choices. Life in this middle-class Tunis household is tense, owing to both Mom's overprotective nature and the

frustration that dad Mahmoud (Lassaad Jamoussi) lives in the center-west city of Gafsa, unable to get a transfer to the capital because he refuses to join the ruling party.

Farah is in a heavy-petting relationship with fellow band member Borhene (Montassar Ayari), a cool lute player with sensuous hands that caress her skin. They try to keep their liaison hidden, but the moment a man touches a woman or vice-versa, people notice and stare. Their band is poised for a breakthrough, and the preview gig goes over like gangbusters, especially the new song "My Country," with its line, "Oh my country, land of dust/Your gates are closed and bring misfortune."

That sort of lyric makes the authorities wary, and Hayet receives a visit from old acquaintance Moncef (Youness Ferhi), an Interior Ministry employee who warns that Farah is drinking and hanging out with people known to the police. Hayet flips (she's given to over-dramatization) and makes her daughter swear she won't go to the gig, but Farah locks her mother in and does the show. Professionally things seem to be going so well, but then manager Ali (Aymen Omrani) wants the band to censor themselves, and tensions mount from every corner: How can Farah fulfill her dreams as an independent young woman in a society that allows only a semblance of freedom?

Helmer Bouzid brings so much shading to the script that the more cut-and-dried last quarter is a slight letdown, as if she felt things had to suddenly be made starkly clear when they already were powerfully drawn. Similarly, wedging in a few scenes about worker tension at the phosphate mines of Gafsa (where unrest was one of the sparks leading to Revolution) feels unnecessary, but these minor quibbles don't compromise the film's overall impact, which skillfully conjures the pressure-cooker atmosphere lying just below Tunisia's surface during the waning days of the dictatorship in 2010.

Especially striking is how the pic evokes the illusion of normality, which makes the roadblocks Farah stumbles over that much more disturbing. This is a society where informers are discovered in unlikely places, and expectations for women, even among the young and hip, run counter to self-expression. With his long hair and easy projection of nonconformity, Borhene seems like a guy happy to see Farah be the fearless woman he praises, but when she draws attention to herself at a party, his traditional concept of woman's place takes over: Women should not make a spectacle of themselves. This emphasis on the gaze carries an enormous impact: As a free-spirited young woman, Farah is the target of censure from everyone, including her mother, whose past gutsiness has been deformed by a state that rules through fear and coercion.

Benali's gutsy perf as Hayet fills the screen with highly-charged energy, so it's to Medhaffer's enormous credit that the novice so potently holds her own. As both singer and actor, she projects an outer fragility consistently overpowered by heady determination, making Farah a deeply satisfying character. D.p. Sebastien Goepfert, who worked on "Blue Is the Warmest Color," has a sensual feel for figures and textures, and the top-notch lensing exhibits a pleasing freedom of movement, with smooth pans and gliding camerawork. Allami's songs have a biting insistence.

## Song

„My country, oh my country, land of dust.

Your gates are closed and bring misfortune.

Turn up ...Turn up the volume, Stip Stip!

My country, land of dust!

Your gates are closed and bring misfortune.

The starving are eating insults.

Your dog's teeth are made of gold but the guns of the poor are toothless.

Turn up the volume, Stip Stip!

The thirsty beg to the good lord.

Tomorrow, they'll be exiled if destiny so wishes."