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THE SWALLOWS OF KABUL

A film by Zabou Breitman & Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec

With the voices of Simon Abkarian, Zita Hanrot, Swann Arlaud, Hiam Abbass

1h21 / Animation / France / 1.85 / 5.1

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SYNOPSIS

Summer 1998 - Kabul under Taliban rule. Zunaira and Mohsen are young and in love. Despite the daily violence and misery, they hope for a better future. One day, a foolish gesture causes life to take an irrevocable turn.



INTERVIEW WITH ZABOU BREITMAN AND ELÉA GOBBÉ-MÉVELLEC

What was the origin of this project?

Zabou Breitman : In 2012, the producer Julien Monestiez came to see me with a script adapted from Yasmina Khadra's novel *The Swallows of Kabul* and the production house Les Armateurs, the producers of *The Triplets of Belleville* and *Ernest & Celestine*, agreed to make an animation film out of it. Was it an interesting project for me? Yes - indeed the idea had enormous appeal, but only on the condition I could do it my way. This meant the characters would have to be carried by the actors' performances, instead of having the actors work in service of pre-determined gestures or expressions. From the start I said: "This is going to need to be extremely well acted." And not just well spoken - the characters' movement, rhythm, and breath had to all hit the right notes. Les Armateurs launched a casting call for designers and illustrators. We started looking at the submissions where the candidates had seriously worked on and elaborated the characters.

Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec : We got the script and we were asked to propose an artistic direction and a complete graphic concept. I knew Didier Brunner, who was with Les Armateurs. I was an animator on *Ernest & Celestine* and I had been developing a personal feature project that Didier had been following. Then he asked me to start thinking about *The Swallows of Kabul*...

Zabou Breitman : There were a lot of candidates and a choice had to be made. Many, very different approaches were suggested. It was important to look at which proposal actually made the project viable. The hyper-realism of acting, emotions, behavior I was looking for, which isn't the same as naturalism, didn't necessarily demand the same hyper-realism in terms of the drawn line. Quite the opposite actually.

Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec : I submitted plates of the sets and scenery, and single characters alone, and then both combined together. I worked on the colorimetry and drawing style first of all in a way that felt consistent with the film's intention.

Zabou Breitman : We ended up narrowing it down to two submissions, both by women artists. What I really loved in Eléa's work most was the way she treated and worked with light: exploding, overexposed, dusty. Actually I think we asked you to come up with additional views and landscapes of Kabul. In your work the city felt like it was there, but also in hiding at the same time. And we see this in the film: lines dissipate with the sun or don't reach all the way to their end. I find it beautiful.

There was also one precise image that made me sure you were the one: your drawing of one of the Taliban smoking a joint and wearing a pair of ray bans. We still had the feeling of watercolours, but also this hostile warrior looking at us from behind his ray-bans and his joint. I said to myself, this is it, this is The Swallows of Kabul. On top of that I liked the fact that Eléa was so young...

Did significant research and documentation go into your work?

Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec : Yes, and once the adventure started taking shape, Zabou and I were constantly watching documentaries, TV reportage, portfolios of photographs. There is an incredible trove of documentary sources on Afghanistan under the Taliban.

Zabou Breitman : In the two minute pilot we created to look for financing, there's a sequence that symbolises the streets of Kabul, drawn from a documentary: in just a few seconds we see in succession: the wheel of a cart, followed by a moped wheel, a horse's hoofs, and a Toyota pick-up.

Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec : It was during our research that we discovered the music video "Burka Blue" by the Burka Band, three young afghani women who formed a garage punk band under the Taliban, and who play wearing a burqa. This is the song that Zunaira is listening to at the beginning of the film.

Zabou Breitman : They had also shot part of the video in the markets, using subjective shots from behind the netting of their burqa. It was from them we got the idea to use these same shots in the film.

Deep down, what was it about the project that seduced you?

Zabou Breitman : In terms of story, there was the opportunity to turn it into something incredible using animation. The extreme abstraction and sense of time that animation brings can help create a kind of softness that's conducive to representing the hardness of this narrative. Drawing it brings a distance that allows us to stand the images. I don't know how well we could withstand a live action film on the same subject. It would be too violent. And seeing Eléa's sketches, the project's outlook and perspectives really felt quite glorious: everything became achievable, even beauty.

Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec : I was in tune with those same ambitions. As I did research and learned more, I saw a potential for graphic richness that you can't find anywhere else. We had the opportunity to shine a specific light on this complicated story the characters are living through. The opportunity to relate something extremely strong based on a powerful visual concept - that was something that definitely interested and inspired me.

Zabou Breitman : The transposition via animation was ideal. And it's what made us legitimate: if not, what right would we have to speak of this story, or to shoot a live action film in Kabul?

Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec : It gave us the freedom to choose precisely what we were going to show, to go and find a symbolism, a synthesis: that one detail that reaches to the essential. A brightly colored gas can sitting among carts that could be from the middle ages...

The next step was then creating the pilot...

Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec : In early 2014 we made a sampler of the film which really served to establish its graphic style and to show what the film would become. It was a scene with two characters: Nazish and Atiq, played by Zabou's father Jean-Claude Deret and Simon Abkarian. There is still a fragment of that scene in the finished film.

Zabou Breitman : Eléa started working according to a process we would follow through the entire project. We wanted to be able to recognize each actor through their character, without making it feel like they were just a carbon copy. We filmed Dad and Simon in the sound recording studio. I asked them to play out the situation, with their all their own gestures and movement, their ways of being. We blocked and staged the scene.

Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec : We took sound on a boom, we installed two cameras with two different angles to use as references, even though this wasn't going to be rotoscope animation... We definitely wanted to avoid the 'hyper-fluidity' of rotoscope. We wanted a more pared down style of animation, as synthetic as possible. And if that meant holding longer on an image, we'd let that image remain in place. But within this we also isolated the micro-movements that bring the desired emotion and serve to distinguish each character. This is really traditional 2D animation: The sets and scenery are fixed, and layers bring in the movement. It's a very manual drawing style, using the brush. A line that disappears, then reappears...

Zabou Breitman : As we created the pilot, I was able to confirm my choices in terms of the animation. A shrug of the shoulders from my father had at one point been reinterpreted 'cartoon style' with a huge, overexpressive arm movement. But it was the original gesture that actually felt right. It was on that basis of these infinitely small movements that I wanted the characters to be animated.

At this point, the project was already launched and in motion?

Zabou Breitman : There was still some reticence about the script. So I said to myself - OK - I'll take the time and re-write it, taking more liberty with the adaptation. Adapting isn't about taking a little bit of everything in the book, but more about eliminating some elements while developing others. I developed the idea of Mohsen and Zunaira questioning themselves: Should they escape Kabul or should they stay to prepare the future? I added the underground school, which really did exist. Another change: Zunaira became a drawing teacher and is still drawing. I found it to be beautiful, for the heroine of an animation film to be drawing herself. Given representing the human body is against the law under the Taliban, making an animated film already was the ultimate transgression. But having Zunaira drawing herself - naked - that was even better.

Fundamentally, it's Zunaira's beauty, and her drawing, that triggers the metamorphosis in Atiq...

Zabou Breitman : In the book, Atiq almost falls in love with Zunaira. In the film, the question is not whether Atiq will save her in order to run away with her - he wants to save the idea of Love in a larger sense. He is in love with the fact that Zunaira has loved and was loved. He sees himself, and his wife Mussarat, younger. He says exactly that: the young need to be saved... Where Mohsen 'dehumanized' himself by participating in the stoning of a woman, Atiq finds his humanity anew. I really like that the trajectories of the characters cross in that way. And also that they actually cross in the film. It was something that Alexander Mallet-Guy, from our French Distributor Memento, had suggested when he came on board to distribute the film. When Atiq meets Mohsen, he repeats what his friend Mirza had told him earlier at the café: "No man owes anything whatsoever to any woman." But he knows that's not true...

Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec : When you were re-writing the script, I remember you tried to make full use of the freedom offered by animation. Especially with two very beautiful ideas: the time lapse sequence in front of the movie theater, with women dressed in Western fashions suddenly wearing burqas when we get back to the present. And then Mohsen, as his feet are washed by Zunaira, seeing the basin turn red in the space of an instant with the blood spilled... Overall you added quite a few visual elements in the script that seemed to be lacking before.

Zabou Breitman : The novel also has to be given credit for two major ideas that are pretty incredible. First off, the fact that with no reason or psychological explanation, Mohsen participates in the death by stoning. And then there was Mussarat's sacrifice.... I also really like the character of Nazish, who is played by my father: an old mullah who isn't going along with the movement anymore. This is someone with true faith, but who also sees the abuses perpetrated in the name of religion. I only met Yasmina Khadra after having written the script, but from the beginning he left us complete freedom.

Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec : He had some very nice words for us. He loved the idea of us grabbing onto his story in order to invent something new.

Zabou Breitman : The novel is set in 2001, while the film is supposed to take place in 1998. In '98, the Taliban have just come to power, they hadn't grown their long beards yet! That's why we hear the football match on the radio and the name of Zidane. I was asking myself: what would be the thing from 1998 that everyone would recognize? Of course the World Cup.

Once the script was finished, did you move on to casting?

Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec : First we spent two years looking for financing! I went back to working on other animation projects, 'April and the Extraordinary World' notably. And then everything kicked off in 2016.

Zabou Breitman : Yes, I was also getting worried for my father who was very old. I absolutely wanted him to be there to play Nazish, with his tired, hesitant voice. I cast the other actors. I had spoken to Simon Abkarian about Hiam Abbas, who he knew well. I said to myself that it would make sense for the older couple to have the light trace of an accent, something in the sound of their voice that wasn't fully French. In turn, this would allow for stronger identification with the other couple formed by Swann Arlaud - who I had cast already before 'Bloody Milk' - and Zita Hanrot, who came to the project quite late. And then there were the three actors from the Comédie Française: Serge Bagdassarian, who plays the mullah, Laurent Natrella who has several small parts, and Sébastien Poudroux, who plays Qassim. For the "Big Bad Guy" I wanted to have a very handsome man. Sébastien also plays the one-eyed man, in the discussion about the war against the USSR. It's him who says, in a disguised voice: "I may be blind in one eye, but I'm not deaf!"

How did you go about the voice recordings?

Zabou Breitman : We did them over four days in September 2016. We were in the big studio in Joinville, in Northern France, with cameras rolling. It was more than just a recording session: the actors were all in character, we had the burqas, the turbans and even the Kalashnikovs! And they were playing out all the scenes. These actors are all creators: they can bring something as small as a hesitation, a cough. They know how to improvise. For example, when Atiq is speaking with Mirza and he gets up to hug him; the moments like these weren't scripted. Everything that was improvised or contributed by the actors - the breaths, the coughs, the pauses - all of it helped nourish the animation later on.

Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec : The place had so many marks, it almost looked like a theater stage. And all of the costumes were there, based on what I had drawn and conceived from my research...

Zabou Breitman : The sound takes were so beautiful: we recorded Zita's voice from under her burqa. When Swann tried to make her drink through it, they started laughing for real. They kissed, they loved each other, they fought. The physical energy would not have been the same if we had just recorded the voices standing in front of a mic. I knew that Simon knew how to perform his ablutions, that he could tie his turban. Hiam and him both knew how one would actually sit on the ground. I wouldn't have been able to do all of this with actors who didn't know all these things.

Had you already planned or storyboarded the breakdown? For example in the discussion between Atiq and Mirza, there are several inserts: cut to pistachios, cut to hands, etc.

Zabou Breitman : They were sitting around the table in the studio, they really had the pistachios. This way their voices would change while they were eating, while they were swallowing. They really had something to drink too. Everything was made so that all the materials of life were there. So we did the breakdown just like for a feature film.

Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec : Unlike live action, with animation everything has to be locked in the earlier stages, to the greatest extent possible. You only have a small margin to change things later on. There aren't any rushes to look at.

Zabou Breitman : In the end, we still figured out ways to tweak or perfect the wide shots: we had to bring back the idea of space, to find a more cinematic rhythm... With the editor, Françoise Bernard, we had this idea of a completely empty Kabul, because everyone would be at prayer. Only Mohsen and Zunaira left in front of the bookstore...

What were the major stages in creating the animation?

Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec : I built up the teams by choosing each collaborator based on their understanding of the project and their capacity to adapt to it. Even those who were more used to 'Disney Style' animation had to have a sensibility amenable to trying new things. We started with the team of storyboarders, there were four of them. They were amazing, complemented each other perfectly, and put all of their creativity in service of the film. The story-boarding led to what's called the animatic, which is a first rough cut from end to end, which is what the editor started working from. It's like a rough draft of sorts for the film.

Next we moved on to the 'layouts': each shot got more specific, with a better perspective on the sets, and we composed the character movements. We also worked on the chromatic palette for the film. Finally, the last step is the animation. The 'layout' stage was very important. Together Zabou and I agreed to emphasize the drawing style over the animation. Some characters are easier to draw, other easier to animate.

Zabou Breitman : There are some animators who just bring a sense of grace to their work. The one who animated Mussarat, she knew exactly how to transcribe the way the character sets her leg in place when she sits down cross-legged. She was incredible. The animator who worked on Zunaira and Mohsen was amazing as well - when they kiss, when Mohsen puts his hand on his lover's ankle, then brings it up along her back... Such sensuality, such beauty!

Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec : The animator who was supposed to be in charge of Mussarat's monologue at the end of the film was petrified. Normally on a feature, one animator does an average of two seconds per day on their own. And here she was with a shot that lasted two minutes, nearly a still

frame and a character who doesn't move much. Her entire contract was just to work on this! But she did a fabulous job, very subtle work, to bring Hiam to life. And at the end of it she was super happy. She had animated one of the essential pieces of the film.

How did you choose the music?

Zabou Breitman : I met Alexis Rault on the TV series 'Paris, etc', where he had added to music by Benjamin Biolay. He brought so much inspiration to this project, notably the idea to use male choirs he recorded in his own home. After that everything felt easy. I encouraged him to use the Iranian song we hear in the film. He took its melody, very beautiful and simple, and was able to riff on variations from there.

Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec : He found the perfect dosage, making the music feel almost like an absence of music. But despite how discrete it is, music actually carries and reveals the entire film.

Did you always agree, between the two of you?

Zabou Breitman : Almost always. Sometimes I had to put my foot down when it came to matters of cinema, like camera angles or rhythm in the edit. But even without consulting each other, we always both had the same answers.

Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec : Our roles were very well defined. We both knew what we wanted!

Zabou Breitman : Sometimes when there was a problem, I would take on the dirty work of dealing with the production. I grumbled when it had to be done. Eléa already had a lot on her plate to deal with. But it was stunning how we agreed about everything!



BIOGRAPHIES

ZABOU BREITMAN - DIRECTOR

At four years old, Zabou played in one of the episodes of the TV show “Thierry la Fronde” alongside her father, Jean-Claude Deret. Zabou studied cinema, modern Greek and English for her bachelor’s degree and attended the Simon course. She was an Animator at “Recré A2” in the 80s and made her film debut in 1982. Often playing more comedic roles (BANZAÏ, THE BEAUF, PROMOTION SOFA), it did not take long for her to distinguish herself. In the 90s, she worked with filmmakers like Diane Kurys (LA BAULE-LES-PINS, 1990), Coline Serreau (THE CRISIS, 1992), Philippe Lioret (CORRESPONDENCE REQUIRED, 1997) and Pierre Jolivet (MY SMALL COMPANY, 1999), or the Jaoui / Bacri tandem in KITCHEN AND DEPENDENCY in 1993.

In 2001, she directed her first feature film, BEAUTIFUL MEMORIES, with Bernard Campan and Isabelle Carré. The film was awarded with 3 Césars including best first feature film. This was followed in 2006 with THE MAN OF MY LIFE and in 2009, JE L’AIMAIS. During this decade, Zabou Breitman acted in the films of Michel Deville (ALMOST PEACEFUL, 2002), Gilles Lellouche (NARCO, 2004) and Rémi Bezançon (THE FIRST DAY OF THE REST OF YOUR LIFE, 2008).

She acted under the direction of Pierre Schoeller, THE MINISTER with Olivier Gourmet and the PERFUME OF THE LADY IN BLACK by Bruno Podalydes.

In 2010 she directed her fourth feature film NO ET MOI, based on the novel by Delphine De Vigan. In 2017, she co-wrote and directed the TV series “Paris Etc.” for Canal Plus.

At the same time, she has pursued a successful career as a theater director, notably with “Winter under the table” (Molière du Metteur en Scène 2003), Roland Topor, “Des Gens”, an adaptation of Molière’s work by Raymond Depardon and “La Compagnie des spectres” (2010) by Lydie Salvayre. Currently her show “logiquimperturbabledufou” is being performed at the Theater du Rond-Point.

ELÉA GOBBE-MÉVELLEC - DIRECTOR

After graduating in Applied Arts, Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec joined the Ecole des Gobelins in 2003. Her first two short films, MADAME (made during her studies in 2006) and ESCALE (2010) were selected at the Annecy.

In addition to her work as a graphic designer on television sets and advertising for luxury brands, she also worked as an animator on short films like BANG BANG! by Julien Bisaro, nominated at the 2015 César Awards for the best animated film, and SMART MONKEY by Vincent Paronnaud (Winchluss) and Nicolas Pawlowski. Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec continued her career as a character animator for feature films such as ERNEST AND CÉLESTINE, THE RABBI’S CAT, THE DAY OF THE CROWS and APRIL AND THE EXTRAORDINARY WORLD. In 2016, she collaborated as a cartoonist on the animated series ‘Lastman’, an adaptation of the comic strip created by Bastien Vivès, Balak and Michaël Sanlaville. THE SWALLOWS OF KABUL is her first feature film as Director.

YASMINA KHADRA - WRITER

Yasmina Khadra, whose real name is Mohammed Moulessehoul, was born in 1955 in the Algerian Sahara. A French writer, his work, translated into fifty or so languages, is known and praised all over the world. The Swallows of Kabul Trilogy, The Swallows of Kabul, The Attack and The Sirens of Baghdad, dedicated to the conflict between East and West, has largely contributed to its fame. Since its publication in 2002, The Swallows of Kabul has sold more than 600,000 copies in France.

FRENCH VOICE CAST

Atiq
Zunaira
Mohsen
Mussarat
Nazish
Qassim
Mollah
Professeur Arash Bayazid
Mirza

Simon Abkarian
Zita Hanrot
Swann Arlaud
Hiam Abbass
Jean-Claude Deret
Sébastien Pouderoux de la Comédie-Française
Serge Bagdassarian de la Comédie-Française
Michel Jonasz
Pascal Elbé



CREW

| | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Directors | Zabou Breitman and Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec |
| Script, Adaptation & Screenplay | Sébastien Tavel and Patricia Mortagne |
| | Zabou Breitman |
| Artistic Director | Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec |
| Based on the Novel by | Yasmina Khadra published by Editions Julliard |
| Music | Alexis Rault |
| A Co-Production of | LES ARMATEURS MELUSINE PRODUCTIONS CLOSE UP FILMS ARTE France Cinéma RTS Radio Télévision Suisse KNM |
| Producers | Reginald de Guillebon Stephan Roelants Michel Merkt Joëlle Bertossa |
| Line Producer | Ivan Rouveure |
| Production Manager | Eléonore Arnal |
| 1st Assistant Director | Marco Nguyen |
| Character Design & backgrounds | Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec |
| Storyboard | Nicolas Pawlowski Mailys Vallade Marietta Ren Jérémy Balais Stéphane Nedez |
| Heads of Background | Marisa Musy Patrick Szewczyk Pascal Gérard |
| Head of Layout & Background Colourist | Pasquale Carlotti |
| Head Animators | Nils Robin Nicolas Debray |
| Head Colorist | Lesceline Haase |
| Head of Compositing | Marc Konings |
| Editing | Françoise Bernard |
| Sound | Eric Devulder Pascal Villard Bertrand Boudaud Eric Tisserand |
| Executive Producers Music | 22D MUSIC Emmanuel Delétang Guillaume Le Hénaff |
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