



QUINZAINÉ
DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT
CANNES 2022

UNDER THE FIG TREES

A FILM BY ERIGE SEHIRI



SYNOPSIS

Among the trees, young women and men working the summer harvest develop new feelings, flirt, try to understand each other, find – and flee – deeper connections.



CAST

Fide Fdhili, Feten Fdhili, Ameni Fdhili, Samar Sifi, Leila Ouhebi, Hneya Ben Elhedi Sbahi, Gaith Mendassi, Abdelhak Mrabti, Fedi Ben Achour, Firas Amri

CREW

Director: Erige Sehiri

Screenwriter: Erige Sehiri, Ghalya Lacroix, Peggy Hamann

DOP: Frida Marzouk

Editor: Ghalya Lacroix , Hafedh Laaridhi, Malek Kamounn

Costume Design: Nabila Cherif

Sound: Aymen Laabidi, Yazid Chaabi, Jean-Guy Véran

Production: Erige Sehiri (Henia Production), Didar Domehri (Maneki Films)

Coproduction: Palmyre Badinier, Nicolas Wadimoff, Philippe Coeytaux (Akka Films), Roshi Behesht Nedjad (In Good Company)





Erige Sehiri



DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Erige Sehiri is a French-Tunisian director and producer. With her own production company, Henia Production, she develops Tunisian author driven documentaries distinguished at Visions du réel, Idfa, Cinemed... In 2018, her breakout feature documentary, *Railway Men*, remained six weeks in Tunisian theaters. In 2021, she wrote, directed and produced her first fiction feature, *Under The Fig Trees*, which won several post-production awards at the Venice International Film Festival (Final Cut in Venice). She then joined the selection of the 54th Quinzaine des Réalisateurs at Cannes 2022.

In conversation with Erige Sehiri

What was the genesis of *Under the Fig Trees*?

I was putting up posters on the walls of a high school to advertise a casting call in a rural region of North-West Tunisia. I wanted to shoot a film about young people running a local radio station and it was then I met Fidé and was completely enchanted by her. She wasn't particularly interested in coming to the casting, but she did audition in the end. I asked her what she was doing in the summer and she told me she was going to be working in the fields and invited me along to see her at work one day. So I went to see her and all the other women labourers and this completely changed my idea about the film I wanted to make! These women agricultural workers moved me and the more I talked to them about their daily lives, the way they worked, their relationships with men, with the patriarchy, the more I realised how much material there was to explore. It made me want to give faces to these working women who are usually unseen. So I started to write, listening in

a loop to *L'Estaca*, the protest song written under the Franco dictatorship in Spain. In the Tunisian Arabic version by Yesser Jradi, it is a song about labour, love and freedom, so naturally I chose it for the film's credits.

Why did you choose to show the picking of figs in particular?

Fidé usually picks cherries, apples or pomegranates, but my father comes from a village in this region where fig growing is widespread. I grew up knowing about the cycle of fig growing and harvesting. I watched my father tend his fig trees and listened to his explanations on fertilisation and pollination. In fact, strictly speaking, figs are false fruit, made up of tiny flowers and we only eat the figs from the female trees! If you are not careful, the milky sap from the stems can burn your fingers, so you have to



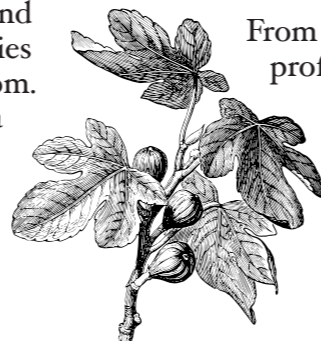
harvest them very carefully. It is also a very sensual fruit, fragile, but with strong leaves; rather like the characters in the film. Fig trees are very beautiful and, in the summer, my region can be very hot and you can hide under the fig trees which provide shelter and respite from the heat. They envelop you, but can also be a bit suffocating. I wanted to construct visually the idea that these girls were also suffocating in their lives, inevitably stifled by a lack of opportunities and a conservative family environment.

How did you come up with the idea of an “enclosed” open-air space? What constraints did you face with this?

The “enclosed” open-air space was necessary in the first place as I needed light. And, of course, there were budget issues, too. This pushed me to come up with a fairly radical solution, which was the decision to shoot outside, with natural light, only one camera, no equipment and only one main set. This meant that we were completely dependent on nature and the weather. During the first few days of shooting, there were no figs ready, so with the

farm owner we were constantly on the lookout for the first fruit. Once the picking began, we then had to worry about the rain which would make the figs ripen more quickly.

We tried climbing up into the fig trees to get different angles for the shots, but the branches can break fairly easily so we couldn't take that kind of risk, which would have caused considerable damage for the farmer. Fig trees grow slowly, which is what makes them so precious. So we made best use of what nature offered us. I quickly realised that these constraints would push us to make particular choices. We were shooting in August and September, when the heat is suffocating between ten in the morning and three in the afternoon. Fortunately, we had the trees to protect us. We also had to be careful as the real workers were harvesting at the same time as we were filming and we had to respect their work. Yet although we had very limited space and shooting under the trees meant fewer possibilities for staging, we still had a feeling of great freedom. We moved around under them almost like a great collective work of choreography within a clearly-defined perimeter.



You paid particular attention to the gestures of the fruit pickers. Why did you focus so much on this?

I think this level of detailing comes from my background as a documentary film-maker and my interest in the space that work occupies in our lives. It is also about the object of this work, too. You can't touch figs repeatedly as they get damaged very easily. So picking them has to be precise and quick, you just cannot handle them for too long. I filmed long moments of the actors working, which meant that they forgot about me. And as all these girls really do work in the fields, their gestures were perfectly natural, there was nothing for me to teach them. Sometimes, in fact, they were even more delicate than the real orchard pickers, but I loved the elegance of their gestures.

How did you choose your cast?

From the outset, the need to work with non-professional actors and actresses became apparent in this environment. I wanted to work with people from this region, who speak the particular dialect of this originally Berber

village. You don't often hear this accent in the Tunisian or wider Arabic-speaking cinema, which in fact mocks it, as it might seem to lack finesse. So I thought this was a way of paying homage to these people and giving them a voice. It was unthinkable to get actors to imitate this accent and, in any case, there are very few professional actors of this age in the region.

How was the film shaped by this diversity of characters and backgrounds?

I think the whole film is about picking and gathering: the stories, the life journeys, the specific places, as I visited several different fig orchards. Some of the characters turned up while we were rehearsing. The boy who plays Abdou (Abdelhak Mrabti), for instance, was the last person to join the cast. And I would gather moments of emotion with light touches, constantly making changes to scenes, to words or intentions. It was very organic, constantly changing and all the while we were shooting, I would talk to my co-screenwriters, Ghalya Lacroix and Peggy Hamann and, of course, with my director of photography, Frida Marzouk.

How did you work with your actors to find this balance?

I never gave them written dialogue. They were simply given the trajectories of their characters and the various relationships they had with each other throughout the day, as well as what was intended for each scene and how this was structured. Then they improvised with all this and I re-wrote accordingly. They used their own words, their own way of talking, speaking with the accent that I know so well, because this is how my father speaks. Sometimes they went for a slightly sensationalist interpretation and I would then try to tone it down. I tried to understand their reactions to my suggestions. For instance, I wanted to change Abdou's first name, but I could see that wouldn't work. Conversely, some of the girls wanted to change their first names, because they really felt they wanted to play a role. I followed what each person wanted according to what they were able to give and show.

The idea of the ten characters comes from my liking

of choral films, which I find are a reflection of life. There are always several points of view, especially in the workplace. And I like to show how each person is linked to all the others.

These girls live in an inland area and Abdou comes from Monastir, a more permissive coastal and tourist town. Did you want to show young people torn between tradition and modernity?

No, I don't think these girls are torn between tradition and modernity, they are so modern! It's not at all about that. To my mind, the point is that they are particularly aware of their lack of opportunities. This confinement under these trees shows that they are like any other young girls in the world, except that they don't have the same opportunities and perspectives. Fidé brings this out when she asks what life is like in Monastir, whether there are tourists, whether there is work. In this region the girls go to school and then work in the fields; that's about all there is.



Was it to underline this lack of opportunities that you chose to frame the characters very tightly, enclosing them in this green setting?

Yes, completely. I felt that beautiful wide shots would have made the film too airy and open and I would have missed something important. I also wanted to convey sensuality through minimalist actions and very realistic dialogue, although working with non-professional actors meant that I had to be somewhat restrained – I couldn't make them do everything – I think that these close-ups sometimes said more than a kiss.

The boys say that the girls are too conservative because they wear the veil and don't want to be touched. Why did you want to introduce this male perspective into the story?

I felt it was interesting to give them a voice. We almost never hear Arab boys talk about their lack of love, physical contact and sexuality; it was important for me to create a space for this suffering. Sana would like Firas to be more conservative, which shows that these are also the desires of women, not always imposed by the men. For some, it is their vision of

the virile man. Sana fantasises about the traditional religious couple, offering security and stability. This makes her touching too.

Without us knowing their family stories, the dialogues and gestures were meant to throw light on the characters' mentality and temperaments. Similarly, the way they dress and wear the veil or headscarf contributes to this characterisation. For example, Fidé, whose veil is always falling off, does not wear it like Sana or Melek. So there is diversity even in the way the veil or headscarf is worn.

The young and old people do not inhabit the same space. You show a very strong contrast between these bodies worn down by years of toil and a younger generation full of vitality and desire.

I wanted to explore this generational gap, so I didn't have characters of the ages in-between. The older women are like mirrors for the girls who get a glimpse of who they could become if they continue to be deprived of opportunities. They are seasonal workers, but Leila, who looks after the orchard, works in the fields all year round. She was like Fidé. She too has loved. These mature women had the

same dreams, but they live in a country in the midst of an economic crisis. They work hard but don't really make ends meet. Working in the summer gives these young people the chance to meet new faces. And this is where the ambivalence comes from: the orchard is a real space of freedom for the young people even if the characters are locked up in it. I wanted to show that they can seize these moments of freedom. When the young people go to the creek, they have a moment of fun, while the older women stay in the orchard and wait for the boss before returning to work. Every break is essential because they coincide with moments of camaraderie that I love to see in life and on film. This is also why I chose non-professional actors. During my first day in the orchard with Fidé, I marvelled at the way these women instinctively knew how to place their bodies, how to sit, how to hold their heads. They know their land and how to nestle into it. They are like paintings.

Desire flows under these fig trees, to what extent was the work of Marivaux an inspiration for you?

Obviously, I have read Marivaux, but in addition to his influence I should also mention that of Abdellatif

Kechiche; my co-screenwriter and co-editor is also Ghalya Lacroix who wrote and edited some of his films. At the time, I completely identified with "Games of Love and Chance" (French, "L'Esquive"), as I had grown up in a French suburb, like the characters in this film. And indeed, in "Games of Love and Chance" a group of young people rehearse the Marivaux play of the same name! So the 'marivaudage' of the French suburbs echoes the romantic playfulness of the Tunisian countryside where my family comes from.

Did you want to depict the loss of innocence? For instance, in the character of Abdou, who is affected by his family drama and who seems to have already come of age.

These young people are no longer innocent, they are no longer adolescents but young adults. Indeed, there is a trauma in Abdou, linked to the death of his parents and the conflict between him and his uncle. He is still very young, but at 17 is already talking about inheritance and the relationship to the land. Melek, on the other hand, experiences the loss of innocence. In fact, in the film, the characters are like figs: they are not picked at the same stage.

You can find ripe fruit and others that are still green on the same tree. I wanted to show characters with different degrees of maturity, whether in their lives or their relationships.

How did you work on the soundtrack and use the different songs that are played at key moments in the film?

Fig leaves are very thick and produce a rough sound that counterbalances the ambient sensuality. I liked this roughness. The sound was wonderfully captured by sound engineer Aymen Laabidi in such a way as to envelop us and make us feel as if we were spending the day with the girls, under the fig trees, hearing the birds sing, the leaves rustle. This is also why we needed very pure music and the composer Amine Bouhafa understood this very well. The song Leila sings at the break is in local dialect. This song is about love, pain, the mother; it is a traditional mourners' song. We didn't show it, but in this scene, all the actors (and even the technical crew) cried; this is what these songs are for, to release suffering, to express the unspoken.

The song the girls perform at the end is a nod to Tunisian folk songs. The lyrics are very funny, and very naughty. In fact, they laugh about it. The old man in the back of the van is embarrassed, but he smiles. The lyrics may have sexual connotations, but these are the types of songs sung before a wedding night. Music is liberating in all cultures! There was no need to subtitle this scene. Finally, when the girls put on their make-up, you can hear them humming a contemporary Lebanese pop song. What I like about these girls is that they are at the crossroads of several cultures, they have a multiple Arab identity, and that is not fiction.

Was your intention to denounce a patriarchal system that exposes young girls to all kinds of control and harassment?

I denounce this system without judging the individuals, who are ultimately prisoners of their own violence. Cases of rape are common in these fields. In my film, I was quite soft compared to what really happens, because I didn't want to demonize men. I wanted to suggest rather than show things too explicitly. The boss, who we understand has taken over the business from his father, plucks the





girls as if they were his fruit. The attack on Melek is not unusual. Melek is strong, as is Fidé, who goes so far as to break her silence at pay time. We can imagine that this harassment is frequent, but it does not prevent them from being liberated in the end, from laughing and being happy because –tragically– this is the daily life of these young girls. The majority of the field workers are women, they are underpaid, have no social security, and are often transported like cattle, but they sing together at the end of their working day.

Does Leila, who denounces thieves to the boss, represent on a larger scale Tunisian society, which is characterized by surveillance and denunciation?

Yes, of course! All our mechanisms are linked to dictatorship. Denunciation is rooted in Tunisian society, although my film is set after the Revolution, in the age of social networks. The scene where the workers are paid is also about the settling of scores. With great dignity, Melek refuses the extra 20 dinars her boss offers her. Leila is a very dignified woman too, but she grew up with denunciation. She does not disguise the fact, rather she assumes it and even demands to be paid for it. I liked the idea that Leila had seen the couple of thieves. She knows everything that goes on in the orchard, but she doesn't snitch on virtuous Sana, the thief, who

seems to be above suspicion. Only Firas has to pay. After all, Leila looks after her girls and is ambivalent, just like Tunisian society.

Rivalries fade between the girls, who are bound by a common fate and who come together. Why does it end this way?

This solidarity was more important to me than anything else. Whatever happens, they are together. Sisters, cousins, friends or all of those things at once, I wanted there to be a strong link between them. The question of love and men should not have to be traumatic. It is the love which brings them together that is the most important. After their day's work, they make themselves beautiful because they do not want to look like farm workers all the time. It is their way of freeing themselves from their social condition. Their status as workers disappears and they become women again. By taking them out of a social condition that imprisons them, I wanted to give them back their dignity and their grace.





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