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LA PETITE JÉRUSALEM

CREW

Writer and Director - Karin Albou
Producer - Laurent Lavolé, Isabelle Pragier
Cinematographer - Laurent Brunet
Cast Director - Maya Serrulla
Production Designer - Nicolas de Boiscuillé
Production Managers - Karim Canama, Julien Gayot and Yann Jouannic
Assitant Director - Gilles Sionnet

CAST

Fanny Valette - Laura
Elsa Zylberstein - Mathilde
Bruno Todeschini - Ariel
Hedi Tillet de Clermont-Tonnerre - Djamel
Sonia Tahar - The mother
Michaël Cohen - Eric
Aurore Clément - Mikva's wife
François Marthouret - The philosophy professor
Saïda Bekkouche - Djamel's aunt
Salah Teskouk - Djamel's uncle

LA PETITE JÉRUSALEM

Written and Directed by Karin Albou
96 Minutes
France
Color
In French and Hebrew with English subtitles
1:1.85
35 mm



LA PETITE JÉRUSALEM

SYNOPSIS

Set in the Paris suburb of Sarcelles, “La Petite Jerusalem” is the nickname of a low-income, concrete housing neighborhood with a substantial number of Jewish - and Jewish immigrant - residents. Among the thousands of men, women and children living there, one small household shelters a Tunisian-Jewish family of eight: Laura (played by Fanny Valette), a French born, 18-year-old philosophy student, her older sister Mathilde (Elsa Zylberstein), their Tunisian mother (Sonia Tahar), Mathilde's husband Ariel (Bruno Todeschini) and the couple's four young kids.

Struggling to find her own voice inside a crowded house, Laura refuses Ariel's orthodox ethical codes and renounces her mother's superstitious background. Instead, the young woman embraces her studies in Kantian philosophy and decides to close her heart to strangers.

Although fully committed to her intellectual and philosophical life (to the point of following Kant's daily, hour-long walking ritual), Laura eventually runs into a classic disruption: an ex-journalist, Algerian-Muslim émigré named Djamel (Hedi Tillet de Clermont-Tonnerre), who also works as a custodian in the local high school. Deeply attracted to his background and persona, Laura is forced to rethink her postulation that all romantic love is, in actuality, a harmful illusion.

As Laura begins a yet-unstable affair with Djamel, Mathilde's efforts to revive the sagging intimacy of her marriage backfire when she learns about Ariel's infidelity. Having followed the rule of religion throughout her life, Mathilde now turns to an unnamed woman counselor (played by Aurore Clement) whose interpretation of Jewish law legitimizes sexual pleasure within marriage and also opens her eyes to different ways of enacting religious faith.

LA PETITE JÉRUSALEM



Karin Albou - Writer / Director

BIOGRAPHY

After studying acting, dance, Hebrew, French literature and Arabic, Karin Albou enrolled in a film school in Paris. Her first short film “Chut,” was awarded the Cinecinema Best First Film prize. After a documentary (“Mon pays m'a quitte”), she chose to talk about Algeria, her father's homeland, in her second fiction short “Aid el Kebir,” winner of the Grand Prize at the Clermont-Ferrand Festival. “La Petite Jerusalem” is her first feature film.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I started writing “La Petite Jerusalem” at a time when I was looking back tenderly at my adolescence and the intellectual theories that I devised to convince myself that passion in love was an illusion. From the very first drafts of the screenplay, the characters of Mathilde and Laura came to the fore: two sisters who each develop a different alibi in relation to desire, one turning to thought and the other to religious concepts. In the course of the film, they call laws into question, lose their certainties and find their respective ways of expressing freedom and desire.

I have tried to leave the film's story as open as possible to allow each member of the audience to create his or her own meaning and so make the screen a mirror. This isn't a didactic or ideological film. I do not offer a precise definition of freedom; each sister sets out with her certainties and then begins to question them. I prefer to use my doubts in creating a work, rather than my certainties, and perhaps that is what freedom means for me: to be content with questions rather than attempt to seek replies at any cost.



LA PETITE JÉRUSALEM

Interview with Karin Albou

Q: This is a film that takes place in Sarcelles [a banlieue, or suburb, north of Paris], but it's not what you'd call a typical "banlieue film"...

A: Perhaps it seems different because cinema hasn't really shown the various faces of the banlieue, with all its populations. You always imagine the Jews living in typical neighborhoods like the Sentier, in Paris. But there's a whole population of Jews originally from North Africa who found themselves in Sarcelles or Créteil, in these projects where all the immigrants were regrouped, regardless of their religion.

Q: Does the film take place in a specific moment?

A: In 2002, because that's the year that the repercussions from the second Intifada began in France. You knew that there were racist insults in the street, that synagogues were being burned. But there was nothing about it on television, nor on the radio. There was a diffuse, very real, fear. To add to it, there was the shock of Le Pen's making it to the second round of the presidential elections. Orthodox people became an obvious potential target, since their religious convictions were visible in their dress. But that context, in the film, is just a framing device. That's the environment in which my characters live, but what I want to tell is, above all, the intimate story of two sisters...

Q: The film revolves around femininity...

A: Through [the sisters], it's also the story of a fatherless family - how does each one deal with that? Their mother carries a deep sadness within her. She is pinned down by her memories, mourning for her husband, the exile from Tunisia...She's always sort of somewhere else. Mathilde (Elsa Zylberstein), as often happens with the eldest, has taken on the role of head of the family, following the father's disappearance. You understand that that's where her authority comes from. She is in charge of everything. That's the key to her character: it's because she holds the reins of the family that, in the same strict way, she also gives the house its religious color. Laura, the youngest, has had the chance to escape this responsibility. That gives her a greater liberty.

Q: Is that why she doesn't cover her hair, whereas her sister wears wigs?

A: No. It's because she isn't married. In the Jewish religion, only married women have to cover their hair, which is considered a sign of sensuality that could tempt other men. For those women, wearing a wig outside, rather than a headscarf, is a way of going unnoticed. Laura doesn't have that problem. She's young and single: she's supposed to seduce.

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

LA PETITE JÉRUSALEM

Interview with Karin Albou

--Continued--

Q: Her philosophy professor initially describes Laura as “obedient”...

A: She wants to be. She thinks she is. At the beginning of the film, Laura is above all torn between her desire and her upbringing. It must be said that Judaism is a religion that is as much a question of faith as of law. You are free within the frame of the law; that's also an idea of the philosophers of the 18th Century: law frees from oppression; it exists to permit liberty. Laura studies philosophy, and she thinks that in doing so, she's opposing her family; but then in her course, she finds this same conception of liberty. Whatever she does, wherever she goes, Laura is always questioning the law.

Q: Even when she has a romance...

A: In the end, by falling in love with an Algerian, she violates the law and gains her freedom. Her sister, Mathilde, on the other hand, needs to live within the law: she cannot feel free through transgression.

Q: She arrives [at her own sense of freedom] thanks to the woman (Aurore Clément) who gives her advice in a public bathhouse: who is this woman?

A: Traditionally, observant Jewish women are not supposed to make love during their periods, nor during the seven days after their periods. Then there is a rite of passage: they go to this place, the mikveh, where they immerse their bodies in a tub of water and “prepare” it for the sex act. In general, there is an older woman, the wife of a rabbi or someone knowledgeable in religious matters, who looks after each woman and makes sure her skin is clean, naked. It's a place of purification. In the film, Mathilde goes there every month, and develops a friendly relationship with this “mikveh lady.” I imagined that, there, symbolically, Mathilde could learn to have a healthier connection to her sexuality...

Q: The things they say to each other...

A: ...are entirely real. I was inspired by interviews I had with several women, by a book by Pauline Bebe, a woman rabbi, and above all I relied on the Shoulkhan Aroukh, a book that lists all the rules of Judaism. In reading them, you see that sexuality is encouraged, that it's even an obligation for the man to make love to his wife. There is no negation of pleasure and desire, but a very precise regimentation. In the end, Mathilde realizes it is actually she who has imposed certain taboos upon herself.

(MORE)



LA PETITE JÉRUSALEM

Interview with Karin Albou

--Continued--

Q: The opening of the film is a close-up of Laura's body, as she gets dressed...

A: I wanted the viewer to immediately be next to her skin, which she is covering up. She puts on her stockings, her blouse...then you don't see anything of her face but her mouth and her hair: her most sensual attributes, which she doesn't cover up.

Q: Later, her attraction to Jamel gets stronger and stronger, and it happens in a changing room, when they're undressing...

A: ...and they're back to back, which symbolizes their situation: they live in the same city, side by side, and yet they don't meet. They belong to two different worlds.

Q: Like Romeo and Juliet...

A: Except that Romeo and Juliet meet at a masquerade ball, and it's only after they have fallen in love that they take off their masks and realize the impossibility of their love. For Laura and Jamel, there are no masks. They know from the outset what their differences are. Being aware of those differences is part of their desire to love each other. Jamel is also an intellectual who has suffered due to fundamentalism. He carries the marks on his body. For him, loving a Jewish woman has meaning in relation to his struggle. For her, loving an Arab is an act of independence in regard to her family. Their union comes out of desire and courage.

Q: The very construction of the film lends a physical sensation... There are echos between what the two sisters experience separately.

A: I wanted to work with repetition. Of certain shots: the walk Laura takes, the study at her desk, the road that leads to the mikveh... Repetition of certain gestures. Of forms. The architecture of the banlieue lends itself to the repetition of forms: it's always the same type of apartments, of buildings, of windows - all conceived in terms of "modules." It seems there's no place for anything "unique."

Q: And in the family's apartment?

A: I wanted for the soberness of the décor, all straight lines and angles, to reflect the psychology of the characters; for the color of the film, in these interiors, to tend toward black-and-white, so that their skin would be the only splashes of color. When you go near the windows, there is no sense of privacy, and the buildings opposite form a series of white squares that block the horizon. That exterior ultimately invades the interior.

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

LA PETITE JÉRUSALEM

Interview with Karin Albou

--Continued--

Q: It's an oppressive environment...

A: Not exclusively. You can find beauty there. I'm reminded of a painting by Arman (Small pale painting) where there are tubes of paint, one next to another, and this repetition of forms creates a form in itself.

Q: Again, creativeness within constraint...

A: And that's just what I like: each one's movement, to invent their own freedom...



LA PETITE JÉRUSALEM

JEWISH LIFE IN CONTEMPORARY FRANCE

LA PETITE JERUSALEM

Written by Deborah J. Hahn, Ph.D.

“Madame, it's like Bosnia in here. We'll never get along.” The comparison to ethnic cleansing struck me as overly harsh coming from the mouth of a high school student. But in 1994, when I taught English in Paris's 3rd arrondissement (a neighborhood heavily populated by second generation North African immigrants, more commonly known as Le Sentier) both Jews and Arabs in my class were filled with a deep enmity for each other. They had no interest in putting aside their differences for the sake of conversational English. They didn't live in the housing projects that mar the landscape of the French suburbs (Huis Clos?), and their petit bourgeois neighborhood wasn't quite like Sarcelles, the site of several recent anti-semitic incidents and the setting for La Petite Jerusalem. But the animosity that divided the Arab students from the Jews was eye opening for me, a nice Jewish girl from the USA, and the heated arguments that broke out in my classroom a harbinger of ten years of anti-semitic attacks on the rise in France. These incidents provide the troubling context for La Petite Jerusalem, a film that depicts the struggles Jews face in France today in a complex blend of the personal and the political. Leave it to a French film to expect viewers to handle lessons from both Kant and the Torah without skipping a beat.

Cinematographically, La Petite Jerusalem can be inscribed in a multi-faceted lineage of independent French films. On the one hand, it is tied to narratives about conflict in the suburbs, of which Matthieu Kassovitz's groundbreaking and award-winning La Haine “Hate” (1995) is the quintessential example. Kassovitz's film is a fast-paced narrative about three disadvantaged young men (a Jew, an Arab, and a Black African) making their way through one night in the suburban projects; the film is notable for both content and style, harnessing a fast-paced energy that reflected the gritty realities of life on the cultural margins. Although tied to La Haine by setting (how many ways can a director stylize 1950s Sovietesque block architecture?), Karin Albou's La Petite Jerusalem is the yin to Kassovitz's yang, thanks to her focus on female protagonists and the lives of women dealing with the suburban environment. Albou's depiction of her lead characters' milieu is marked by a tension between entrapment and freedom. In this, Albou owes a debt to author/directors such as Agnes Varda or Chantal Akerman, some of the most influential foremothers of women's cinema in France. Indeed, La Petite Jerusalem's measured pace and attention to daily life is very much in line with Varda's and Akerman's early films (Cléo de 5 à 7; L'une chante, l'autre pas; Saute ma ville; Je tu il elle) many of which feature the same attention to repetition and interiority. But unlike other recent French films focusing on how women's relationships sustain them through tough times (Erick Zonka's 1998 La vie revêe des anges, for example) Albou's film is specifically connected to trends in Jewish memoir that go beyond French borders.

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

LA PETITE JÉRUSALEM

JEWISH LIFE IN CONTEMPORARY FRANCE

CONTINUED

As in Pearl Abraham's acclaimed novel *The Romance Reader*, *La Petite Jerusalem*'s plot centers upon the coming of age narrative of a young woman in an Orthodox family. But the household, like most Jewish households in Sarcelles, is Sephardic, more in line with the Tunisian Jewish home that Albert Memmi describes in his autobiographical *La Statue de sel* (Pillar of Salt).

In this, the family reflects the French Jewish population (which although it is the third largest in the world, after Israel and the United States, represents roughly only 1/10th of the Muslim community in France, estimated at close to 5 million out of a total French population of approximately 60 million). According to statistics compiled by the Fonds social juif unifié (FSJU), there are between 500,000 and 575,000 Jews in France (depending on how you count interfaith households). In a poll of Jewish households the FSJU conducted in 2002, 70% of over 1100 respondents identified as Sephardic. Thirty percent of the French Jewish population lives in the Paris region. ["France: un portrait de la population juive." *Religioscope*. December 5, 2002. www.religion.info] The figures are ever changing, however, as rising anti-semitism and overt pro-Israel campaigns such as l'Agence France's "Sarcelles First" has intensified French Jewish desire to move to Israel (aliyah). Polls from 2004 indicated that 6% of French Jews had plans to leave for Israel ["Quel avenir pour les juifs de France?" Sunday, June 13, 2004. *Ligue de defense juive*. www.liguededefesejuive.com] How many members of Sarcelles' Jewish community of roughly 10,000 will choose to stay after this year's events? *Albou's* fictional *La Petite Jerusalem* is a good portrait of the ambivalence many feel about this very question.

Questioning whether to stay or to go is not 18-year-old protagonist Laura's only dilemma. Raised in a fatherless home, Laura has an ambivalent relation to her patriarchal religion's expectations for women, as presented by her widowed mother and married sister. Scenes of her commute to the Paris city center to study philosophy bring her out of the hermetic environment of her Orthodox community; each rumble of the train underscores the fragility of her worldview. Laura and her sister Mathilde are each experiencing a mind/body problem (that is to say they've got issues with sex), which they work through in very different ways. We could subtitle the film: "Sex and the Suburbs" - thanks to a brilliant performance by Aurore Clement as the advice-dispensing Mikveh guide (an Orthodox Carrie Bradshaw?). The sexual narratives in the film, however audacious, are not gratuitous. Laura's forbidden relationship with Algerien Djamel - anathema to both their families; Mathilde's husband's betrayal and her subsequent sexual awakening. They are intensely political, and grounded in real tensions between men and women, Arabs and Jews, secular culture and the Orthodox religious community.

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JEWISH LIFE IN CONTEMPORARY FRANCE

CONTINUED

Director Albou chose to set her story in Sarcelles in 2002 in order to play off the tensions emerging from specific repercussions the Jewish community experienced after the second Intifada. In July 2001, two Jewish schools in Sarcelles were victims of attacks - one was hit by a Molotov cocktail, the other burgled. Members of the Jewish community regularly felt threatened on their way to services. At the time, leaders of the Jewish community in Sarcelles warned that the events were a wake-up call. In January, a synagogue in neighboring Goussainville was set on fire (Sylvia Zappi, *Le Monde*, "La banalisation des actes antijuifs, nouvelle cause de tensions urbaines" Feb. 19, 02). Then, in November 2005, suburbs across France exploded in France's worst riots since 1968.

For the first time in a long time, the French government has had to address overtly the violent socio-economic inequities that have been oozing at the margins ever since the post-war boom went bust a generation ago. With his country ablaze before the world's eyes, Chirac has had to confront questions of "integration" and inequity. The talk is of Arabs, of Africans, and of France's institutionalized denial of difference. But now that the debate has gone national, even international, where are the Jews? Will France be content to subsume discussions of anti-Semitism into a vaster problem of cultural difference?

Like real life, *La Petite Jerusalem* is a morality tale that doesn't leave us with easy answers. At film's end, we are still grappling with the same conflicts experienced by my former high school students. Neither philosophy nor religion alone can provide respite from the unbearable tensions dividing Arabs and Jews in France today. The city of light has suburbs bathed in darkness; the sunsets over Sarcelles -- "little Jerusalem" are a far cry from the magical glow of an Israeli sky at day's end. Speaking philosophically, however, we can take solace that films such as this one help illuminate the problems, perhaps making way for enlightenment.

Written by Deborah J. Hahn, Ph.D.