

NORA EL KOUSSOUR ILIAS ADDAB



Layla M.

a film by
MIJKE DE JONG

TOPKAPI
FILMS

ntr: [MENUET]

CHROMOSOM^x

SCHIWAGO FILM



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SYNOPSIS

Layla is an 18-year old girl, born and raised in Amsterdam. Layla is smart, witty and stubborn – and of Moroccan background. In the times of constant terrorist threat, she struggles with the increasing suspicion towards girls with headscarves and boys with beards that she witnesses every day. While her frustration grows, her faith intensifies. Eventually, she joins a group of Muslims who fight for their practise of Islam. Layla posts films online depicting the horrors in Syria and Gaza and makes political flyers. And she flirts with the charismatic Abdel.

When her peaceful brother and she are arrested by the police, Layla, feeling hurt and isolated in her anger, more and more in conflict with her parents, is left with only one option: to leave home. She chooses marriage, with Abdel. After their wedding, Layla and Abdel roam the country together, perform 'missionary work', and raise money for the good cause. But after they narrowly escape a raid by the Belgian police on a group of young jihadists, they have to flee, to the Middle East.

Layla encounters a world that nurtures her ideas initially, but finally confronts her with an impossible choice.



DIRECTOR'S NOTES

Layla is tough, irritating, lovable, allergic to injustice, certain of her own convictions, feminist and in search of a place where she can be herself. Due to fear and incapacity, she is a girl who frequently shows her dark side, but who eventually and with enormous passion, chooses a courageous life; one in which she speaks her mind should she deem it necessary. Even if this means contradicting the strict codes by which her Muslim brothers and sisters abide by. Her faith in Allah is unconditional, but in her own way.

In my opinion, Layla is (and should be) a vulnerable heroine.

For a long time, I have wanted to make a film about a girl who radicalises and by doing so, places herself - partly - outside society. I recognise many patterns from my own youth in Layla's story: the passion and commitment to social injustice, the black-and-white simplistic way of thinking and the appeal of us - against the rest of the world. When I arrived in Amsterdam in the eighties, the squatter's movement was about to conquer the city. Within no time, my life consisted of campaigns and demonstrations. The more radical the better. I was looking for structure, for a family, for my identity.

That was 30 years ago. Jan Eilander, who is largely responsible for the screenplay, and I wanted to make a film set in the NOW. In a multicultural, upside-down society where your opinions have to be newly devised on a daily basis. In the years that Jan and I have been working on this film, not much has changed in terms of the basic idea, but a lot has changed in the world around it. The conflict is very complex and good and bad is not so easy to identify. Just the same, there is a group of young people who do not feel at home in the country where they were born. We believe it is important in this era to shine our light on a young woman and a young man belonging to that group. We want to give insight why a girl like Layla, with her character and sense of justice, needs the safe limits of a radical group to develop. She can express her dissatisfaction, profess her faith and divide the world into good or bad. But she eventually breaks out again. Ultimately the bond of the group is squashed. Her 'external aggressive' perception of religion and political beliefs, gives way to a more tranquil internal perception. She dares to allow more colour in her monotone view of the world, whereby she becomes closer to herself.

Mijke de Jong





MIJKE DE JONG Q&A

You have made multiple films regarding ‘social issues’; what motivated you to make a film about a radicalizing girl?

In the first place curiosity and fascination. Religion and activism are themes that are very close to my heart. I want to make films that take place in the now; when we began to develop this film, this was the subject that I wanted to delve into. The Arabic Spring had just begun. Young Muslims from all over Europe were radicalizing and moving to Syria. Initially, we saw resemblances to the freedom fighters from the Spanish civil war. At the time we didn't know how violent and endless the battle would become. But we (scenarist Jan Eilander and myself) did know that the dissatisfaction and resistance of young Muslims that don't feel at home in Amsterdam, also had something to do with us

and that our new film would touch this subject. The scenario has known many versions. Never before have I worked on a film that has struggled so intensely with the spirit of time. We were caught up by reality many times. The situation in the Middle East became more and more complicated and the attacks in Europe were growing in numbers. At first, we had the tendency to adopt this in our scenario, but that wasn't the story we wanted to tell. Only when going back to our first starting-point, and started focusing again on the girl from Amsterdam with a radical personality, the screenplay took off. A girl looking for her own identity, who meets the love of her life and wants to change the world with him, all in her own way: Layla M. was born. Among many things, *Layla M.* also tells the story of a love that is torn apart by opposing views.

You really had to dig into this.

Yes, but that's nice about this job. Initially we have read a lot. Basic knowledge. Build a network. Trial and error. For instance, when Jan and I were about to travel to Syria, the war became very diffuse. The resistance was dividing and bomb attacks near the borders eventually made it too dangerous for us to go. Jan wrote the scenario for the most part. I went out more: to the mosque, to 'sister'-meetings...

It's not an easy world to get into, as so many things take place underground. But we have come really close. It was very useful for me to talk to women who were de-radicalized and wanted to share a lot – up until the why and where to exactly place a pin on a headscarf. We have had contact with a young woman, who has a past somewhat similar to Layla's story, and that made Layla become a girl of flesh and blood. It's quite tough to delve deeply into a character that is driven by anger. But we had to. I had to understand Layla to be able to direct this film.

And that doesn't only apply to me, but also definitely applies to the actors. Nora and Ilias have also done a lot of research. They are both religious and know the Quran, so that was a great advantage. But they also had to adopt the characters' radicalizing thoughts. That rage gets under your skin and things get way too close sometimes. We all have reached a point where we couldn't take it anymore, all in different ways and at different moments. It was all very intensive.

A large part of the story takes place in Jordan; how did you experience filming there?

It was really a joy filming there. We went with only a small group of our own crew – from the Netherlands and Belgium – and were accompanied by a Jordan/Palestine crew. That was love on first sight. It was also quite confronting, as we were filming in really poor areas and border regions; a refugee camp.



Is there deliberately chosen for a girl as a main character?

I always turn to women, because I'm able to tell a more nuanced story when it's about a woman. When talking about radicalization, people always seem to refer to the militants. And then there's the story of the woman following her man. That wasn't the story we wanted to tell, because it simply isn't always like that. More and more 'Layla's' are showing up. Highly educated, smart, determined and filling important positions (yet 'in-house') within the battle.

The film tells one story, but of course there are many, many more. In this case, the story is about parents who are completely assimilated, with children who are searching for their roots and culture. Who don't feel at home in the city they have been brought up in, and are searching for something to hold on to within quite a diverse milieu. In case of Layla, that's an enormously complicated search, so at the moment you're trying to resist against your surroundings, making such a radical choice isn't even very strange. Dissatisfaction, powerlessness, not being seen and resistance are matters of all times. For this generation of 'future-radicals', the Caliphate may seem attractive, but it is not the place where girls like Layla really want to be, if they listen to their hearts. Layla turns around when she is confronted with her own words. In Amsterdam she is looking at a video of a female suicide terrorist, lost in admiration, but when everything gets really close she is aghast. Eventually, Layla realizes that she has to choose for herself, and she doesn't need radical men around her who exercise their authority.

How did the casting go and how did you find Layla?

That was, like it always is, quite a search. For my previous films I've auditioned hundreds of girls. In

this case it was a bit less complicated, because I was looking for a girl from a certain origin. It became clear to me that I didn't want to work with a real amateur on this film. And Nora isn't, she has just graduated from the theatre school in Rotterdam and is now accepted in The Maastricht Theatre Academy. Nora, introduced to me by casting director Rebecca van Unen, immediately intrigued me, but it took me some time to make a final decision. Like it often goes, the decision was made after an unexpected moment. After a screen-test – Nora was just about to leave – I asked her to sing an anasheed (religious song), together with Ilias, who had chosen the piece. It appeared to be her favorite anasheed, one she used to sing when she was little. Ilias started singing and Nora joined in. It was overwhelming, so much passion. And those two together... I was completely touched. Then I thought: If she can do this, we can make this work.

And you had already cast Ilias?

Yes, I knew Ilias already and he had been in my mind from the beginning. We have auditioned some other boys, but eventually turned to him. I don't know many actors who can be completely 'in the moment' like Ilias is. Next to that he had more experience already and was, with his generous personality, a great help for Nora.

What did you consider to be important in showing a radicalization process?

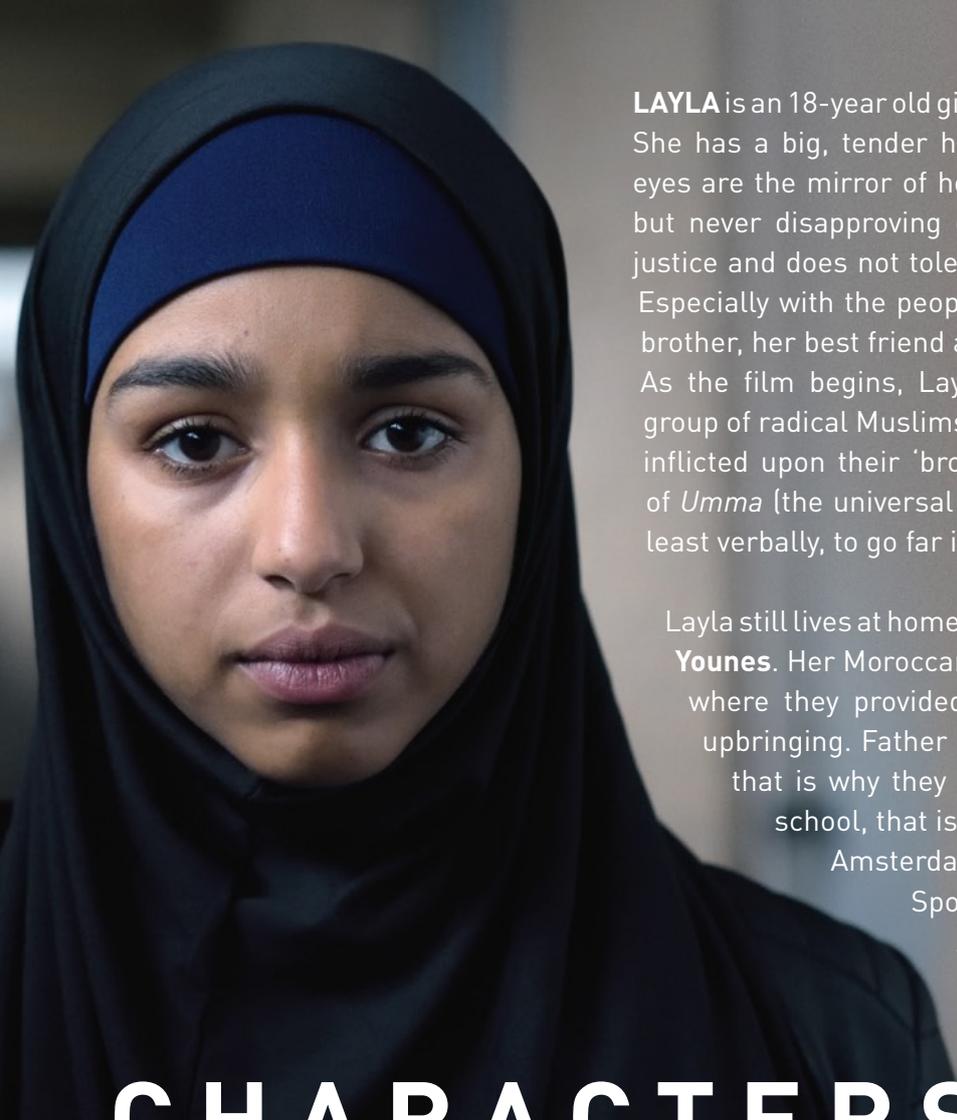
For me, the film isn't so much about showing a radicalization process, but about a girl with a radical personality. A girl that completely loses herself in life and love in order to find out who she really is. What we consider to be important, is that you always have to be able to follow her. Even when she goes too far. And she has to go too far, otherwise the film doesn't

touch the heart of the story. The scene in which she looks at a video showing a suicide attack and admires it, is such a moment. It's okay to disagree with her, you can hate her persistence, but you may never lose her. That was quite a challenge.

With what kind of feeling do you hope people will leave the cinema?

I hope that people are touched, that the film raises questions, that they get a girl like Layla. And a boy like Abdel. That people will start thinking less in terms of 'us' and 'them'. That it makes angry boys and girls think twice and that locals might have a somewhat different approach when sitting in the tram, next to a woman wearing a headscarf. But altogether, I hope that my films will make the world a little softer. The more you know, the more you'll understand.





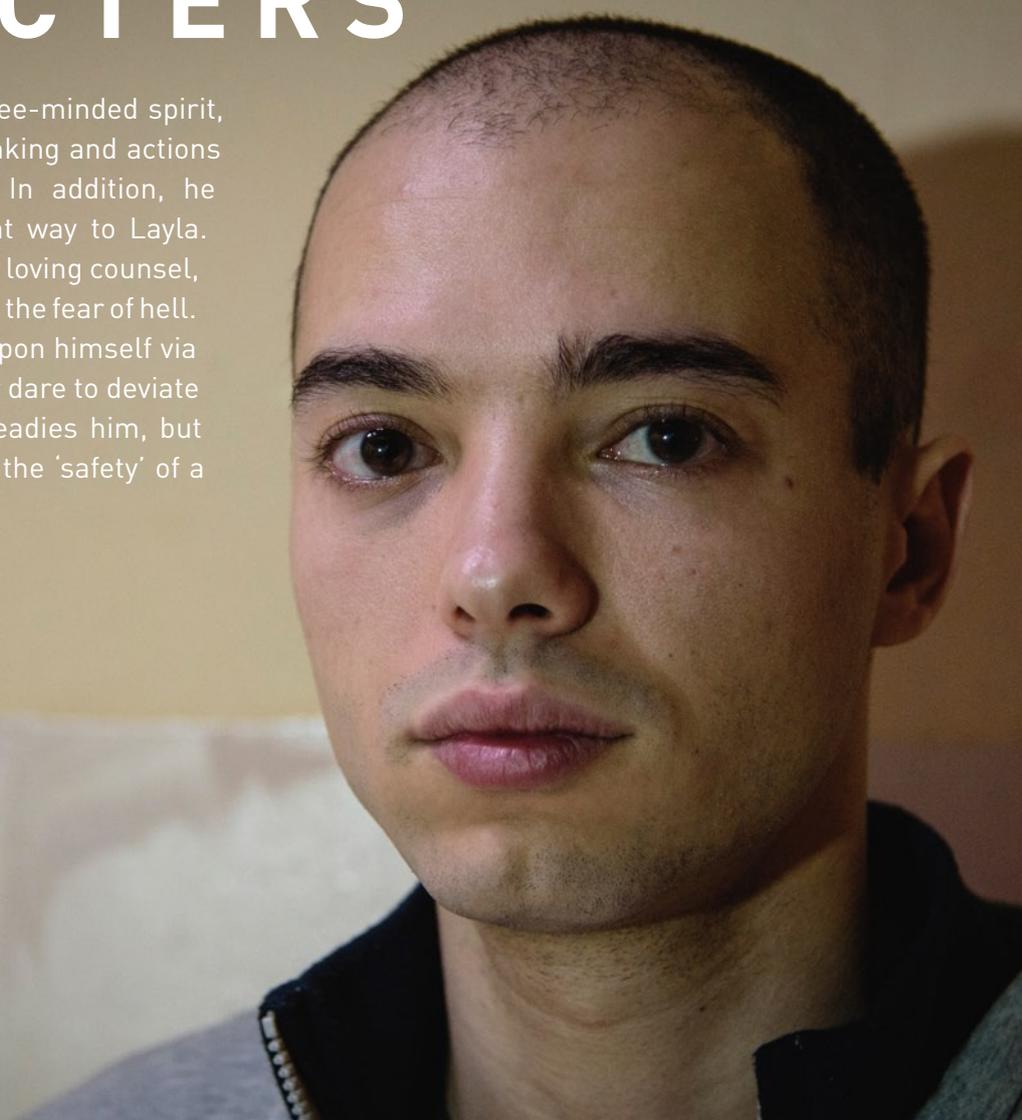
LAYLA is an 18-year old girl from Amsterdam of Moroccan descent. She has a big, tender heart that she prefers not to show. Her eyes are the mirror of her soul. Smiling, eruptive, sad, anxious, but never disapproving or resigned. She has a great sense of justice and does not tolerate authority. She seeks confrontation. Especially with the people who are close to her. Her father, her brother, her best friend and her (future) husband Abdel. As the film begins, Layla, guided by 'the pure Islam' joins a group of radical Muslims, who are opposed to the injustice being inflicted upon their 'brothers and sisters' - inside and outside of *Umma* (the universal Muslim community). Layla is willing, at least verbally, to go far in her opposition.

Layla still lives at home, with her **Father and Mother** and brother **Younes**. Her Moroccan parents emigrated to the Netherlands, where they provided Layla and her brother with a liberal upbringing. Father and Mother are completely assimilated; that is why they place their children in a 'mixed' public school, that is why father and son are members of the Amsterdam football club, Sloterdijk FC and not Sporting Maroc.

A loving family, though Layla often disturbs the harmony with her big mouth and indiscriminate behaviour.

CHARACTERS

ABDEL has the potential to be a free-minded spirit, but is also impressionable; his thinking and actions are easily influenced by others. In addition, he experiences his faith in a different way to Layla. Where Layla experiences Allah as a loving counsel, Abdel, next to feeling love, also feels the fear of hell. That is why the rules he imposes upon himself via faith are sacred: he doesn't want or dare to deviate from that. His love for Layla unsteadies him, but he ultimately chooses a life within the 'safety' of a like-minded group.



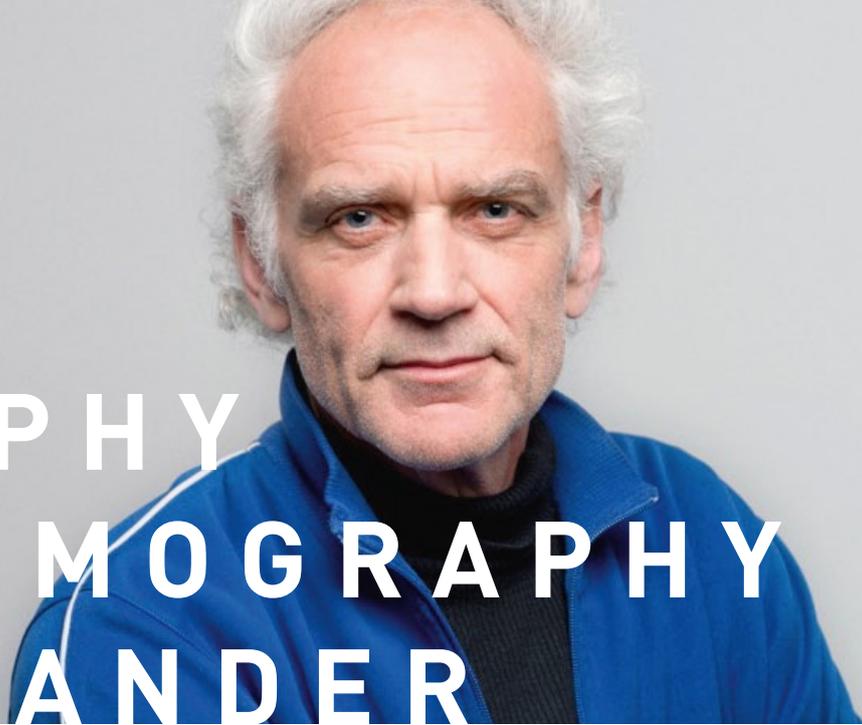
A close-up portrait of Mijke de Jong, a woman with dark, wavy hair, smiling and looking to the right. She is wearing a dark jacket and a headset with a microphone. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

BIOGRAPHY AND FILMOGRAPHY MIJKE DE JONG

For almost twenty years, the films by Mijke de Jong show great social involvement, from her first feature film *Love Hurts* (1992; Toronto International Film Festival – Special Jury Award Locarno) to *Layla M.* De Jong's international breakthrough came with *Bluebird* for which she won a number of awards, e.g. the Crystal Bear at the 2005 Berlinale. *Bluebird* was followed by *Stages* (Special Mention Locarno) and *Katia's Sister* (2008; official Berlinale, Toronto and Locarno selections). Award winning feature film *Joy* (2010) was shown around the world and got the Best Feature Film Award in The Netherlands. Feature film *Frailer* (2014) premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival. Last year she worked together with the theatre collective Wunderbaum on the film *Stop Acting Now*, which had its premiere during the 2016 edition of the International Film Festival Rotterdam. *Layla M.* will be de Jong's 9th feature film.

Filmography selection

- 2016 *Layla M.*
- 2016 *Stop Acting Now*
- 2014 *Frailer (Brozer)* * selection Toronto International Film Festival
- 2010 *Joy* * selection Generation 14+
- 2008 *Katia's Sister (Het zusje van Katia)* * selection Berlinale, Toronto, Locarno, nomination Golden Leopard
- 2007 *Stages (Tussenstand)* * Locarno Special Mention
- 2004 *Bluebird* * Crystal Bear Berlinale, Toronto Sprockets Young People's jury award
- 1997 *Brittle (Broos)* * Golden Calf
- 1993 *Love Hurts (Hartverscheurend)* * selection Toronto, special Jury award Locarno

A portrait of Jan Eilander, an older man with white hair, wearing a blue jacket over a dark turtleneck. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression.

BIOGRAPHY AND FILMOGRAPHY JAN EILANDER

Jan Eilander (1959) wrote over 20 drama productions and feature films and made several documentaries and television programs. A great number of films and television productions based on his scripts won prizes at (inter)national film festivals. *Katia's Sister* (2008) received the Golden Calf Best Screenplay and the Silver Geraldillo in Sevilla; *Love Hurts* (1992) won the Special Jury Award in Locarno and the Dutch Film Critics Award; and the children's television series *Ik ben Willem (I am Willem)* was awarded with The Golden Chest in Bulgaria and the Grote Kinderkast award at the Dutch Cinekid Festival. Since September 2015, he is film commissioner for the Netherlands Film Fund.

Filmography selection

- 2016 *Layla M.*
- 2016 *A Real Vermeer* * premiere September 2016
- 2015 *J.Kessels* * opening film Netherlands Film Festival 2015
- 2008 *Katia's Sister (Het zusje van Katia)* * selection Berlinale, Toronto, Locarno, nomination Golden Leopard
- 2002 *I am Willem (Ik ben Willem)* * selection Cinekid / Grote kinderkast award, The Golden Chest, Bulgaria
- 1999 *André Hazes* * Joris Ivens Award / documentary
- 1993 *Love Hurts (Hartverscheurend)* * selection Toronto, special Jury award Locarno

NORA EL KOUSSOUR AS LAYLA

Nora El Koussour (1994) is a young actress from the Netherlands. She is graduate at the Rotterdam Theatre school and starts at the Maastricht Theatre Academy in the Summer of 2016. She played her first leading role in *Layla M.* Before *Layla* Nora played a part in feature film *Boy* and she is known for her work in the Dutch theatre.



ILIAS ADDAB AS ABDEL

Ilias Addab is known for his leading parts in feature films *Don*, *Kicks* and *Amsterdam*. In 2012 we saw Ilias in *Snackbar* (Meral Uslu), which premiered during the Berlinale and won the best film award in Tallinn. His most recent film *Time will tell* will have its release in 2016.

CAST & CREW

LAYLA Nora El Koussour
ABDEL Ilias Addab
WRITTEN BY Jan Eilander
DIRECTOR Mijke de Jong
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY Danny Elsen SBC
PRODUCTION DESIGN Jorien Sont
COSTUMES Jacqueline Steijlen
MAKE UP & HAIR Trudy Buren
SOUND Joost Roskam
FIRST ASSISTANT DIRECTOR Anne van Dongen
EDITOR Dorith Vinken NCE
SOUND DESIGN Mark Glynne
RE-RECORDING MIX Alek Goosse
COMPOSER Can Erdogan
CASTING Rebecca van Unen
LINE PRODUCERS Jet Christiaanse, Chantal Nissen, Rula Nasser

CO-PRODUCED BY NTR – Marina Blok
MENUET (BE) – Dirk Impens
CHROMOSOM FILM (GER) – Alexander Wadouh
SCHIWAGO FILM (GER) – Marcos Kantis
THE IMAGINARIUM FILMS (JOR) – Rula Nasser

PRODUCERS TOPKAPI FILMS (NL)
Frans van Gestel, Arnold Heslenfeld, Laurette Schillings

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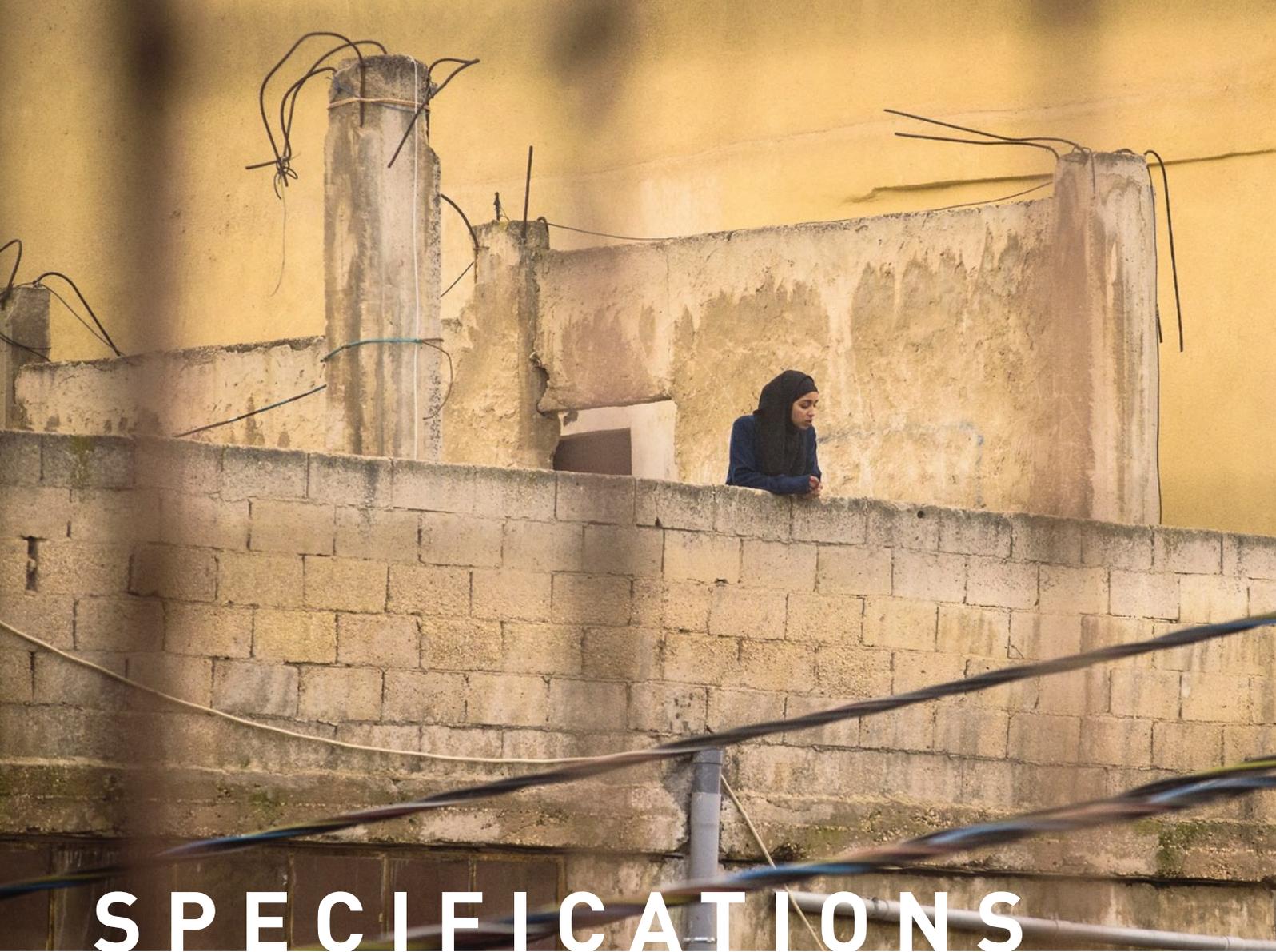
SCHIWAGO FILM

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THE ROYAL FILM COMMISSION JORDAN





SPECIFICATIONS

SHOOTING FORMAT	HD
SCREENING FORMAT	DCP
IMAGE RATIO	1:2.39
DURATION	98 min.
LANGUAGES	Dutch, Arabic, Moroccan
SOUND	5.1
CO-PRODUCTION	Netherlands – Belgium – Germany

A man and a woman are embracing on a rooftop at dusk. The man, with a beard and wearing a blue sweater, has his arms around the woman. The woman is smiling and looking towards him. The background shows a cityscape with buildings and a clear sky.

TOPKAPI FILMS MENUET CHROMOSOM

TOPKAPI FILMS is an Amsterdam based company run by producers **Frans van Gestel**, **Arnold Heslenfeld** and **Laurette Schillings**. The company, well experienced in producing and co-producing feature films and television drama for the Dutch and international market, strives to build long-term relationships with writers and directors. Titles successfully (co)produced include a.o.: *Frailer*, *Post Tenebras Lux*, *Black Butterflies*, *Public Works*, *Belgica*, *The Commune*, *All of a Sudden* and *The Broken Circle Breakdown*.

www.topkapifilms.nl

MENUET is the production company established by Dirk Impens in Belgium since 1989 and formerly known as Favourite Films. The company has produced and co-produced about 30 full-length feature films and several TV series, including *The Misfortunates*, *Daens*, *Katarakt*, *Left Luggage* and *In Flanders Fields*. Feature film *The Broken Circle Breakdown* has been released worldwide, won numerous awards (Berlinale, European Film Award, César) and was nominated for the Oscar Best Foreign Language film. Recent title *Belgica* received the best director award in Sundance.

www.menuet.be

CHROMOSOM was founded in 2006 by **Alexander Wadouh** and is based in Berlin. The aim is to develop and to produce national and international cinema features and documentaries with a political position and zeitgeist. A selection of films produced till now: *Oh Boy*, *White Shadow*, *Crashkurs* and *Wonderland*.

www.chromosom-film.de



BETA CINEMA

World sales and co-financing company Beta Cinema has established itself as a 'boutique-operation' for quality feature films that combine commercial viability with artistic integrity. Prime examples are Oscar winners and worldwide B.O. hits like *The Lives of Others*, *Il Divo*, *Mongol* and *Downfall*. Current highlights include the Emma Watson, Daniel Brühl, Michael Nyqvist thriller *Colonia*, Sundance Grand Jury Prize winner *Sand Storm* and 6 times German Film Award winner *The People vs. Fritz Bauer*.

www.betacinema.com



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