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# GOOD MOTHER

## A FILM BY HAFSIA HERZI

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## **SYNOPSIS**

NORA, a cleaning lady in her fifties, looks after her small family in a housing estate in the northern part of Marseille. She is worried about her grandson ELLYES, who has been in prison for several months for robbery and is awaiting his trial with a mixture of hope and anxiety. NORA does everything she can to make this wait as painless as possible...

# INTERVIEW HAFSIA HERZI

### Why did you choose to make discreet *Nora* the subject of your second feature as director?

It's a story I've always wanted to tell. I began the screenplay in 2007. This mother courage character has fascinated me since I was little. I was raised alone by my mother, who was a cleaner. My father passed away when I was very young. I have unbounded admiration for this woman who, by the time we woke up in the morning, had prepared everything for us and already left for work. I wanted to make a movie about her and all women, whatever their origins, who forget themselves and constantly put their children first.

#### Which explains the French title, Bonne Mère (Good Mother).

Yes, and I could have put it in the plural! The good mother in the film is also Marseille, and Notre-Dame de la Garde (Our Lady of the Guard), who holds her son in her arms and watches over the city, in the same way as Nora, the heroine, looks after her family.

#### Why Marseille and its *quartiers nord* (northern districts)?

Before making movies and traveling for my work, that was all I knew. I grew up in *Les Églantiers* neighborhood, in a building opposite the one where we shot the film. The *quartiers nord* have always inspired me. I wanted to immortalize those high-rise buildings, which will be demolished one day, show the atmosphere there, and make its noises resonate. When we were shooting, we installed microphones all over the place, recording at night even. The result was an amazing sound archive, including the hens, roosters, cats... Like the human inhabitants, the animals there are left to their own devices. Visually, I wanted to capture the simple, beautiful and unique light of the place. Between the luminosity and sound, the neighborhood also radiates a gentle realism.

#### Is the whole movie bathed in that light?

Yes. In editing, I cut some scenes simply because I wasn't seeing that beautiful light. It became an obsession. I'm passionate about filming and shining a light on the specters of modern society that inhabit the *quartiers nord*, where I grew up. It feels like a duty to «recount» a section of the population that no one talks about. I realized that the neighborhood of my childhood was increasingly rundown and neglected. The people living there are cut off. In the last seven-eight years, crime has become an everyday occurrence! When we were scouting for locations, we heard shooting around us. When I was growing up, there wasn't such extreme violence.

#### Is it easy to make a movie there?

I was able to do so only because I grew up there. I worked with a small crew, which is how I like it, and it's impossible to do otherwise if you want to capture the reality of life there. You need to blend into the background.

## Was working with a small crew what allowed you to shoot the scene when Nora goes to the drug dealer's hangout?

For that scene, my brother Mohammed, who was working with me for the first time, had done the location scouting. He had found a spot in the hood where there was drug dealing and even an active prostitution ring. That's where we decided to shoot our drug-scoring scene. We set up at three in the morning, and shot the interiors, with an even smaller crew than usual, to keep it inconspicuous. Some childhood friends took care of security. We were nervous. At dawn, we filmed the exteriors, and left as soon as we were done. It was stressful, and we were scared of waking up the whole neighborhood.

#### Were there other special conditions involved in filming in that neighborhood?

We didn't use walkie-talkies, so we couldn't be mistaken for the police. Other than that, filming there was an experience in solidarity. Living amid a lot of poverty and unemployment, people there really help each other out. I hired a lot of locals, in front of the camera and behind it. There was a real family atmosphere. For example, the custodian was a childhood friend. He helped us get on the rooftop when I needed to film a sunrise with a panoramic view. It was the only time when it was possible to film from there because the rest of the day and night, there are lookouts on every rooftop, whose job is to raise the alert if the police are coming. So it was pretty tense. We had to take off as soon as we'd gotten our shot.

#### What about Nora's apartment?

Like the neighborhood, the apartment is a character in its own right. It was hard to find. We didn't want to overrun people living there, and we couldn't take over an apartment that a family could live in. We found an empty one that was scheduled for demolition, and totally renovated it. We recycled so much stuff. Everybody brought something along. I kept asking Halima Benhamed, who plays Nora, what she thought of it, if it felt credible to her.

#### Who is Nora? How did you create the character?

Nora is a dignified, strong woman who has no choice but to keep putting one foot in front of the other. She is also wistful, prone to a moment of reflection, with a kind of melancholy hanging over her. In the face of harsh reality, there is gentleness emanating from her. I was very attached to that soft side to her. It doesn't stop her having real character. She's not a submissive mother, even if she has put her own life as a woman to one side.

#### How did you choose Halima Benhamed to play Nora?

When I was casting the role of Nora's daughter, Sabrina Benhamed, one of the young women who came to audition, was accompanied by a middle-aged woman, who gazed into the distance the whole time. Sabrina told me she was her mother. We got talking, and I asked if she would audition for the role of Nora. She laughed and turned me down. She didn't feel she could be an actress. I didn't insist. I waited and asked again. She refused again. Halima is a very shy lady. Finally, I managed to convince her. We did some screen tests, which were magical. That gaze of hers won me over. Artistically, it was love at first sight. Before Halima came along, I had auditioned a lot of older ladies, but the trajectory of their lives was too marked by suffering with no way back. Of course, I wanted to capture the difficult reality, but I wanted the audience to sense that nothing is set in stone for Nora. I admit I was getting desperate when I met Halima. I rewrote the role for her, making the character younger.

#### What was she like to work with?

Very smart. I always felt like I was talking to a career actress. Halima immediately understood the emotions we required. She has real presence, and doesn't know it. She's someone you can't take your eyes off for the whole duration of the movie, and that's rare. She let her gray roots grow out for the film, and stopped plucking her eyebrows. It was important, on a realism level. Nora has no time to herself, no time to buy hair dye. Those details reveal the realities of Nora's life. She only gets time to attend to her hair every six months or so, when a woman's hair is her femininity!

#### You cast Sabrina Benhamed, Halima's daughter, to play Nora's daughter.

The whole cast is made up of people I fell for artistically. I was touched by Sabrina's outstanding motivation. It was like a glimpse of myself at auditions, years ago. Sabrina is a hard worker. She has become a sister to me. On set, we had no apprehension about speaking very frankly to each other. And she is resplendent. She has a slightly period face that radiates sensuality. I love faces with prominent features. I love beauty that is not classical.

### Like your first feature, *You Deserve A Lover*, *Nora* is the story of a small group. Why?

My aim was to shoot an exuberant Italian-style story, by which I mean comedy in the context of a life of hardships or even impossibilities, being happy to transcend suffering, something enchanting amid socially intolerable circumstances. Like in a Marcel Pagnol movie, everything oscillates between the love they all have for each other in this group of family and friends, and the chaos around them with its funny moments and strife. I wanted to show how these real-life characters naturally generate humanity, solidarity and solid values despite the poverty, and to recreate the life I had as a child, when we'd walk into the neighbors' apartment without knocking, without calling ahead. Everybody knew everybody. Filming this family, all its generations, with their small and large problems, came very easily to me. There's the son in prison, the daughter-in-law who is there with her teenage son, the daughter who has an infant child, the younger son who tries to act the real player. All revolving around Nora. For her, it's hard to carry the whole family, yet that is her equilibrium. I also wanted to show the Marseille element, with its accents and conversations, where everybody constantly interrupts each other.

#### How did you set about scripting the dialogue-heavy scenes?

I love talkative people! Which is the exact opposite of me. I listen a lot and register things. I'm very curious about what other people will tell me or teach me. People often say, «You don't say much, you're weird.» It's just how I am. And I love films with lots of dialogue because it makes me forget I'm in a movie theater. I love words, talking, sitting at sidewalk cafés, listening to the chatter of conversations. When I'm with my friends and they come up with some incredible phrases, I jot them down to use later when I'm writing my scripts. It's a way to keep the characters sounding natural and casual. I'm not talking about film dialogue in the classical sense, where everyone respects the breaks and waits for their scene partner to say their line, and so on. That can sound really good, but I prefer it when there are hesitations and slip-ups in among the flow of words. When I'm directing, I tell the

actor, «If you forget a word, or stutter, or start giggling, or blushing, don't stop, don't look at the camera. Keep going!» Also, I adapt the dialogue to the personality of my actors. Every scene is fully dialogued. There's no improvisation.

## On set, was it easy to manage so many extrovert personalities, this collective vibrancy?

It was great because I love when there are lots of people. All the actors were non-professional except for the character of the aunt. It was constantly on the edge artistically. We rehearsed extensively in order to forge a bond between cast members. Now, I can say for sure that our bond is for a lifetime, and some of them want to make a career in acting. That's important for me, because if I can't find a way to love the person opposite me, I can't film them. These are people whose initial calling was not acting. Sometimes it was hard for them emotionally because they don't have the technique of professional actors. They really have to dig into their emotions so, immediately after a take, they may be left with a strange feeling. We stood together, though, and like I said it was a real family atmosphere. I was the big sister, not scared to bawl them out.

#### There's also all the work that went into the minor roles.

My brother supervised casting those characters and gave me advice. He'd say, «That guy, you'll get a half-hour out of him, but I can't guarantee he'll be back tomorrow. The neighbors helped out, too. If we needed something, a kitchen utensil as a prop maybe, we'd ring their doorbell. At the end of a scene, everybody naturally pitched in to clear the set. The actors' relatives even came along to work as extras.

# You show a world of people finding ways to get by without letting the world get on top of them. Where did you get the idea of a group of young women earning money from BDSM sessions with wealthy clients?

A long time ago, when I was twelve maybe, a friend's sister told me about rich men who paid her for fulfilling their sexual fantasies of being humiliated and beaten by a girl from the projects. She showed me her closet and everything she had bought with her earnings. I saw her driving by in a beautiful car. According to that young woman, it wasn't prostitution. Maybe she believed the idea that she was just dominating the men. That isn't for me to judge. People are free to do what they want. But I never forgot what she told me, so when I was writing *Good Mother*, I made it one of the plot lines, not as an anecdote, because there's nothing anecdotal about it, but to show the

consequences of the precarious circumstances the characters live in. That's reality. In the movie, I didn't want to show anything crude or sordid in those scenes. I found a quick and comedic way of cutting things short. The point of it for me was to show the girls' obliviousness, thinking they'll have a wonderful life by getting their hustle on.

## How did you find the young women who pack such a punch in the scenes about this plan to earn easy money?

I love those girls! They are Anissa Boubaker, who does a lot of dancing, and rap singer Saaphyra. They have unbelievable energy, but in real life they are nothing like their characters. They are two artists playing a part and giving great performances. My brother told me I really should meet them. They are so unique that I wrote their characters into the script. They are very sensual and alive, and you never hear girls talk like that! The way they express themselves is pure poetry, I think. Their poetry. A language all of its own. It added a touch of freedom to the film. And I wanted free women, women who wouldn't tell me, «I can't say that because I'm scared for my reputation.» On the contrary, these are free-spirited women who were down for everything. Nothing scares them.

#### There is also the outside world in the film: the prison where Nora's eldest son is incarcerated, the airport where she works, the house of the elderly lady, Viviane, whom Nora cares for. What do all these places represent?

Real life when you live where Nora lives. In those neighborhoods, a lot of young people are in prison, and a lot of mothers are on their own looking out for them, taking parcels to them. The scenes outside the project were important because they show that even when she leaves her neighborhood, Nora lives a life of responsibilities, with still more commitments. Entering the prison, going to work at the airport, or just getting on the bus, Nora's life is full of checks.

#### Her work also brings Nora love and a second family.

Yes. There are bills to pay, food to buy-Nora needs her job. She does it with honesty and perseverance. And she lives another life at the airport or with Viviane, the elderly lady. Once again, I thought back to my mother going off to her cleaning job at a middle school. And I was inspired by a friend who told me about her job cleaning airplanes. She explained how she had a whole separate life with her coworkers, how they used to cook meals for each other. I liked the togetherness she described. I liked the atmosphere. They work hard, they are friends, and above all they understand each other. I was sure it would be beautiful to film. Also, it contains a beautiful

metaphor for Nora's life. She cleans planes before they take off, while she is left on the ground. She knows she will most likely never go anywhere, but she sticks it out for the team spirit she enjoys with her coworkers. And when she gets home, she doesn't go out again. She has her children to look after.

## And there is the bond that Nora has with Viviane, who is a big fan of 70s French pop star Frédéric François.

My mother used to work for old folks, too. She lost her mother very young, and she really enjoyed being with these older women. They always struck up a good relationship. They gave her clothes and baked cakes that my mother brought home. It seemed natural for this affection and friendship between women of different generations and different social standing to be in my film. We forged a similar relationship with Denise, the 86-year-old who plays Viviane. She was so committed to the project that she used to send me videos of her listening to the records of Frédéric François. She wanted to show me she was taking her role seriously. At the end of the shoot, she said to me, «Thanks for the memories you will be leaving for my children and grandchildren.»

#### Why Frédéric François?

My mother was a big fan. We grew up with his music. I really like it. It's a whole period in popular culture. He sings beautiful love songs. I wanted him to be part of my movie!

## Talk to us about your work on the protagonists' costumes, and Nora's in particular.

Nora's clothes need to be discreet, simple and efficient. It has to work fast, with her fanny pack in which she keeps everything she needs to hand. It says a lot about her modesty and lack of self-confidence. Her appearance is not her priority. It's always about being practical and sensible. For the other characters, I wanted them all to feel physically comfortable to focus on their performance. We did a lot of fittings, considered every angle. Everything needed to be as beautiful as possible without screaming «costume!» At the same time, the clothes needed to be items they might pick up at the local market, for example.

#### What has this second feature given you?

Deliverance. I'm pleased to have made the film I have been writing for years, and pleased that I didn't make it earlier. I'm more experienced now. It was long years of work and reflection so, yes, to see the story on screen now is a relief.

# BIOGRAPHY HAFSIA HERZI

Hafsia Herzi made her debut as an actress in Abdellatif Kechiche's *The Secret of the Grain* in 2007. For this role she won the Marcello Mastroianni prize at the Venice Film Festival, the César for the best female hope in 2008 as well as numerous acting prizes throughout the world.

In 2010 she directed *Le Rodba*, her first short film. *You deserve a lover*, her first feature film, entirely self-produced, was selected at the 58<sup>th</sup> Cannes International Critics' Week and won the Valois of staging at the Angoulême Film Festival in 2019.

## FILMOGRAPHY HAFSIA HERZI

AS A DIRECTOR

**2021 GOOD MOTHER** 

**2019 YOU DESERVE A LOVER** 

International Critics' Week, Cannes 2019

#### AS AN ACTRESS

**2021** MADAME CLAUDE by Sylvie Verheyde **2021 SOEURS** by Yamina Benguigui **2019 PERSONA NON GRATA** by Roschdy Zem **2019 MEKTOUB, MY LOVE: INTERMEZZO** by Abdellatif Kechiche **2019 YOU DESERVE A LOVER** by Hafsia Herzi **2018 BLACK TIDE** by Erick Zonca **2018 FÉMININ PLURIELLES** by Sébastien Bailly 2017 MEKTOUB, MY LOVE: CANTO UNO by Abdellatif Kechiche **2017 OF SKIN AND MEN** by Mehdi Ben Attia **2017 SUPERLOVERS** by Guilhem Amesland **2016 THE WORKING GIRL** by Sylvie Verheyde **2015 BY ACCIDENT** by Camille Fontaine **2014 BAG OF FLOUR** by Kadija Leclerc **2014 CERTIFIED HALAL** by Mahmoud Zemmouri **2014 WAR STORY** by Mark Jackson **2013 ON MY WAY** by Emmanuelle Bercot **2013 THE MARCHERS** by Nabil Ben Yadir **2013 MOROCCO** by Caroline Link **2012 INHERITANCE** by Hiam Abbass **2011 JIMMY RIVIÈRE** by Teddy Lussi-Modeste **2011 THE RABBI'S CAT** by Joann Sfar and Antoine Delesvaux **2011 THE SOURCE** by Radu Mihaileanu **2011 HOUSE OF TOLERANCE** by Bertrand Bonello **2010 JOSEPH AND THE GIRL** by Xavier de Choudens **2010** LE RODBA by Hafsia Herzi (short) **2009 BURRIED SECRETS** by Raja Amari **2009 THE KING OF ESCAPE** by Alain Guiraudie **2009 DAWN OF THE WORLD** by Abbas Fahdel **2009** A MAN AND HIS DOG by Francis Huster **2007 THE SECRET AND THE GRAIN** by Abdellatif Kechiche

# FILMOGRAPHY SAID BEN SAID PRODUCER

**2021 GOOD MOTHER** by Hafsia Herzi

**2021 BENEDETTA** by Paul Verhoeven

**2021 TRALALA** by Jean-Marie and Arnaud Larrieu

**2019 THE SPELLBOUND** by Pascal Bonitzer

**2019 FRANKIE** by Ira Sachs

**2019 BACURAU** by Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles

**2019 SYNONYMS** by Nadav Lapid

**2018 PLACE PUBLIQUE** by Agnès Jaoui

**2018 PAUL SANCHEZ IS BACK!** by Patricia Mazuy

**2017 REVENGER** by Walter Hill

**2016** LOVER FOR A DAY by Philippe Garrel

2016 AQUARIUS by Kleber Mendonça Filho2016 ELLE by Paul Verhoeven

**2016 RIGHT HERE RIGHT NOW** by Pascal Bonitzer

**2015 SHADOW OF WOMEN** by Philippe Garrel

**2015 VALENTIN VALENTIN** by Pascal Thomas

**2014 MAPS TO THE STARS** by David Cronenberg

**2013 JEALOUSY** by Philippe Garrel

**2013** A CASTLE IN ITALY by Valeria Bruni Tedeschi

**2012 PASSION** by Brian de Palma

**2012 LOOKING FOR HORTENSE** by Pascal Bonitzer

**2011 CARNAGE** by Roman Polanski

# FILMOGRAPHY MICHEL MERKT PRODUCER

**2021 GOOD MOTHER** by Hafsia Herzi

**2021 BENEDETTA** by Paul Verhoeven

**2021 TRALALA** by Jean-Marie and Arnaud Larrieu

**2019 FRANKIE** by Ira Sachs

**2019 BACURAU** by Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles

**2019 IT MUST BE HEAVEN** by Elia Suleiman

**2019 THE TRAITOR** by Marco Bellocchio

**2019 SYNONYMS** by Nadav Lapid

**2019 PHOTOGRAPH** by Ritesh Batra

**2018 THE SISTERS BROTHERS** by Jacques Audiard

2018 THE DEATH AND LIFE OF JOHN F. DONOVAN by Xavier Dolan

**2018 CAPHARNAÜM** by Nadine Labaki

**2018 AYKA** by Sergei Dvortsevoy

**2018 HAPPY AS LAZZARO** by Alice Rochrwacher

2017 MEKTOUB MY LOVE CANTO UNO by Abdellatif Kechiche

2017 ZAMA by Lucrecia Martel

**2017 WESTERN** by Valeria Griesbach

**2017 LOVER FOR A DAY** by Philippe Garrel

**2017 STRONG ISLAND** by Yance Ford

**2016 REVENGER** by Walter Hill

**2016** ELLE by Paul Verhoeven

**2016 MY LIFE AS A COURGETTE** by Claude Barras

**2016 TONI ERDMANN** by Maren Ade

**2015** LIFE by Anton Corbijn

**2014 MAPS TO THE STARS** by David Cronenberg

# ARTISTIC LIST

NORA	Halima BENHAMED
<b>SABAH</b>	Sabrina BENHAMED
<b>JAWED</b>	Jawed HANNACHI HERZI
ELLYES	Mourad Tahar BOUSSATHA
AMIR	
MURIEL	Justine GRÉGORY
MARIA	Maria BENHAMED
VIVIANNE	Denise GIULLO
LUDIVINE	SAAPHYRA
ANISSA	Anissa BOUBEKEUR
CORALIE	
ATOU	Waga Kodjinon Marthe LOBÉ
LILA	Lila ALLOUCHE
<b>MARCO</b>	Jean-Marc FIORE
LUIGI	Luigi DESIMONE
CORALIE	
VIRGINIE	Sophie GARAGNON
LE DENTISTE	Philippe LAYANI
AVOCATE	Régine BANET-DUCLOS
LA VOYANTE	Brigitte KAKOU
CARMEN	Carmen SANTIAGO

# CREW LIST

A film by	Hafsia HERZI
Produced by	Saïd BEN SAÏD
	and MICHEL MERKT
Screenplay	Hafsia HERZI
Director of photography	Jérémie ATTARD
Sound Gui	Ihem DOMERCQ (AFSI)
	Rémi DUREL
	Julie TRIBOUT
Edit	Camille TOUBKIS
1 <sup>st</sup> Director's assistant	Alexandra MAÏO
Production manager	. Marianne GERMAIN
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