

SYNOPSIS

The story of Latifa Ibn Ziaten is the story of a mother who becomes an activist. When her son is assassinated by a terrorist in France, her world falls apart. Instead of giving up hope, she decides to take action, working her way through schools to speak with young people, fighting hatred with love and trying to be a bridge over our troubled water.

ABOUT

LATIFA IBN ZIATEN

Latifa Ibn Ziaten was born on January 1, 1960 in Tetuan, in northern Morocco, previously a Spanish colony. She spent the first 9 years of her life in Ceuta, a Spanish enclave, where her mother had exiled herself to spare her family the shame of her divorce. Her mother died in December 1969, and Latifa had to return to Tetuan with her brothers and sisters. She was brought up by her father, who refused to send her to school, and then by her aunt who provided her with two years of an Islamic religious school, where she learned a bit of Arabic, and lastly by her grandmother, a woman with an independent character and head of the clan, who became her role model.

In 1976 her brother wanted to marry Latifa to an older man, but she ran away, having already chosen Ahmed, whom she had met on the beach at M'Diq, a small seaside resort near Tetuan. Ahmed worked in France for SNCF, the French railways. In 1977 she joined him in Saint-Etienne-du-Rouvray, near Rouen. Before having children Latifa wanted to learn to read and write in French. Five children were born, four boys and a girl (Hatim, Imad, Ikram, Naoufal and Ilyasse) but Latifa never stopped working (in the markets, and in a school dining room). In 1986 the family left the town and bought a detached house. The children grew up peacefully in a double culture, like many French families. One of them went into the army: Imad.

On March 11, 2012, while on a trip in Turkey, Latifa received a call: Imad had been murdered by a killer on a scooter in a parking lot in Toulouse. The killer was Mohamed Merah, a young Frenchman who had become radicalized and been in prison and the Afghanistan of Al-Qaeda. He would kill two other soldiers and then three children and a teacher at a Jewish school. France was entering a new era of terrorism and the life of Latifa turned upside down.

ABOUT THE MOVIE

OLIVIER PEYON and CYRIL BRODY

THE ORIGIN OF THE PROJECT

Olivier Peyon

The idea of the film was born out of a discussion with Carole Scotta of Haut et Court, who had produced my full-length documentary, "How I hated math". It was March 2015, several weeks after the attacks on the editorial offices of Charlie Hebdo and the Hyper Cacher mini-market at the Porte de Vincennes. At the time one saw a lot of Latifa Ibn Ziaten in the media. The organization she had set up in 2012 following the murder of her son Imad by Mohamed Merah was in constant demand since the attacks in January. For both politicians and journalists Latifa appeared to be someone to turn to. Carole Scotta had seen her on television and wanted to do something to publicize what she was doing. When I met Latifa, I met a vivacious woman with a sense of humor, far from the image of the *mater dolorosa* transmitted by the media. There was complexity in her smiles, a contrast between the sadness of mourning and a vitality that was stronger than death. It was this complexity that made me want to film Latifa, and through her travels and meetings to draw up a portrait of France in 2017, about her youth, her fears and her hopes.

I knew that to jolt the rather stilted picture one could have of her it was necessary to follow her for the long haul (filming took over a year), without limiting ourselves to her public activities. We had to be able to spend time with her, with her family, make ourselves vanish, improvise, slip into her car, leave her unawares as things happened, to follow her around everywhere. I was therefore going to have to find a flexible and light filming set up, and would have to pass up on the traditional team.

When I introduced Latifa to Cyril Brody, who was going to write up the movie file to get financing, a natural chemistry developed between the three of us and the idea came while we talked to make the film with Cyril, who is also a director. We could take turns behind the camera in our talks with Latifa, and we were a duo that could be stimulating and could avoid the stiffness of a team. So I offered Cyril to be a co-director, and we took turns to be soundman and cameraman.

Cyril Brody

We've known each other for eighteen years; I was co-scriptwriter of Olivier's first film, 'Les Petites Vacances' ("The Short Vacations"). He in fact first of all asked me to script the film about Latifa, who interested me because she let me get a grasp on the present. It's true that when we went to see Latifa, she spoke sometimes to Olivier, sometimes to me. We noted the benefit of being two for the filming: this let us avoid a purely frontal discourse, to vary the points of view, to catch the details. In fact, it also happened that each of us went alone with Latifa on her trips.

LATIFA IS THE NAME OF WHAT?

Cyril Brody

When we started thinking about the film, we asked ourselves what the personality of Latifa allowed us to understand and tell us of today's France. Her visits to schools and prisons were met with enthusiasm, politicians and media people loved her: she represented the missing link between two worlds. In a period marked by mutual distrust between the institutions of the state and a part of the youth, Muslim or not, she was coming to reestablish the links that appeared to have come undone.

Olivier Peyon

She is Muslim and her talk is clearly republican. In one sense, she defends secular values not unlike those of Elisabeth Badinter, about whom I made a documentary a few years ago. But where Elisabeth Badinter is today not heard by the youth in the suburbs, Latifa Ibn Ziaten is listened to. She wears a headscarf; she says, in a phrase that takes the place of introducing herself: "I have paid the highest price." And the youngsters listen.

Cyril Brody

Latifa is a woman who comes from Morocco, who has children who have succeeded, one of whom became a French soldier - the high road to success. She is the incarnation of the model immigrant - the "beautiful story", as a young girl from Tangier tells her in the film. However, this story tragically met that of Mohamed Merah, who could have had the same sort of career path as her children, but whose trajectory was exactly the opposite. One side of the history of French integration brutally collided with another, which prior to the death of her son she largely did not know. And so she decided to deal with these youngsters from the other side, these French who did not feel French because they reckoned they were not considered as such. In a sense, Mohamed Merah was both very far and very close to Latifa. When she went to meet the young people who mixed with Merah, to a degree she knew them, even if she had never set foot in their rundown housing estates.

A MODERN WOMAN

Olivier Peyon

Making this movie required working round the rather unequivocal image of “saintliness” that the media often offered. We preferred to show another type of positive figure, both more urgent and truer. I do not think Latifa is a saint, but I have seen her ability to give confidence to those with whom she is speaking, to these youngsters whom the meritocracy of the French educational system leaves dumped at the side of the road. Latifa is a powerful woman, a modern woman. Her daughter told us she wasn’t at all surprised that Latifa had become what she is today. She always took the decisions in her life. She couldn’t study because both her father and her brother were opposed, when they wanted to marry her off, she refused. Then she decided to leave to France for love, to follow her future husband, a Moroccan who worked near Rouen. I think she had wanted anywhere else, that basically she felt that her birthplace was too small a town for her.

Cyril Brody

She has an unalterable sense of her own legitimacy. She actually has the feeling of being in the right everywhere, whether in the presence of prisoners or of the President. She never asks herself, “Who am I to speak?”, she just speaks. She goes ahead.

Olivier Peyon

She has always been modern, even in the way she wears a scarf, knowing as we do the tension this item generates in France. The photos of her that we filmed show her with her hair, like most modern women in Arab countries in the 1970s. She donned a scarf following the death of her son, as a sign of mourning, and then kept it, because she made the pilgrimage to Mecca. Today it’s part of her, of her grief, of her privacy, but it doesn’t stop her giving a small kiss on the cheek to men or young people, nor to pray in a church or a synagogue. Wearing it lets her be better listened to by some, especially in the prisons. Latifa is a believer, but when she took up the symbols of her religion again, it was in order to propose a very modern version of the Muslim woman, free and independent. So it is certainly in this way too that she reaches youngsters, especially girls. In this fashion she is feminist in a subtle manner. And I think the film is too.

THE INTELLIGENCE OF FEELINGS

Cyril Brody

What Latifa says is firstly a tale about herself. She tells it like an actress, or rather like a narrator. From appearance to appearance she goes over her story, finding the same words, based on a score that she worked up between the funeral of her son, at the end of March 2012, and her very first speech at the Invalides on September 19, 2012 for the ceremony to honor the victims of terrorism, in the presence of all the French politicians, who could not get over seeing this tearful mother demanding that we do something for

these young people, to avoid another Merah materializing. Unlike them, she did not bury her head in the sand, and in a sense predicted what was going to happen three years later.

Olivier Peyon

This was the starting point for all her activities. We saw her develop, which let us understand how she built her speech. The people she was speaking to ask her questions, which could open up new areas for her - about education, secularity etc. She then offers answers that are then inserted into her later speeches. So she has a position about parental responsibility in the future of their children. One day a young girl asked her what do you do when you don't have parents, or when your parents reject you. Latifa improvised: those who don't have parents have to look around them for someone who can help them. As for parents who have resigned their responsibilities, despite everything they must be helped, because their children have the most chance to make them change.

Cyril Brody

Latifa is not an intellectual. Her intelligence is intuitive. For her, everything goes through her feelings. It's not calculated: when you speak to her, she can laugh, and suddenly have her eyes full of tears. But this ability to be always connected to her emotions is fantastically effective: I've opened up completely, now, let's go! It's a way of overcoming distance, of being direct. Facing her, youngsters who could keep up their guard are themselves overcome with emotion, and end up talking about themselves. It's a sort of cathartic approach, education by tears.

Olivier Peyon

She manages to make people, whoever they are, feel alive when with her. From this point of view she possesses true generosity: she speaks without being overwhelming, without ever trying to dominate her audience. So when the youngsters from the suburbs are being forever put in their place, she makes them hear something else.

Cyril Brody

And she does this without smugness. Her strength is to take the opposite point of view of those before her. Before an audience of lawyers in Aix-en-Provence she told how, at a police station the police officers suspected her son of being a dealer just because he was an Arab. She doesn't tell it the same way to the youngsters of the suburbs who are convinced up front that the cops are racists: with them she takes a malign pleasure telling them that she keeps Ramadan but that at the same time she served pork in the school canteen. Or by inviting them to fulfill themselves in other ways than by opening a kebab restaurant, to look further ahead, to want more. Just like she always wanted more.

REFUSAL TO BE A VICTIM

Cyril Brody

Underlying Latifa's fight is the refusal to be assigned the position of victim that could have been hers. She seems to say: I will not be where Mohamed Merah put me. It's what distinguishes her from those Moroccan women who are victims of attacks whom she brought to Paris in the film: Latifa considers it a pity to be satisfied with commemorations or demands for compensation. The Imad organization is an organization "for youth and peace", an organization that wants to act. That's why there are two parts to its activities. Lectures, which consist of testimony, but also what she calls "projects": the organization of educational trips, focused on living together and discovering one's fellow man.

Olivier Peyon

In the film we see her preparing for a trip of young Israelis and Palestinians to France and another in China for young, disadvantaged French from the suburbs. Why China? Because she was invited there by two young French women from Beijing. These two women, who live thousands of kilometers from the everyday life of France, are completely in sync with the film's questions: what can we do, each to our own ability, where we live, not to remain passive and fight with our own weapons against obscurantism and everything that divides and separates. For her part, Latifa she seizes every opportunity: it's Beijing, but it could just as well have been rural France or Washington. She's always on the alert, makes use of every means available. Every project that she constructs is a sign of an improvement for a young person, of a step forward. She gets busy by imagining their enthusiasm and that future keeps her going. It takes her out of her grief, every day.

A POLITICAL FIGHT?

Cyril Brody

Latifa would never say that what she does is political. She knows that many people feel that politics is to play the parties game and seize power. She knows this all the more so since she is frequently in contact with ministers, mayors or parliamentary deputies for her requests and projects. She has seen one succeeding another since March 2012. But underneath, everything she does is politics, whatever she calls it, for us its politics and the movie shows that. The governing class knows this full well because they turn to her and listen to her, but she keeps her distance from their stakes.

Olivier Peyon

Yet she is not wrong when she says in the film, "I am not a political woman". She speaks with her heart, her sadness, her feelings. She does not want to apply the self-control that politics sometimes demands. That's her strength, it is also her limitation, and she doesn't necessarily have words for everything, the political phrases that hit the nail on the head. We did not seek to hide this. Her speech is simple. Her fight is "peace for the young". To help another is to work for peace. It's what she says when she gets a rejection notice for her project in Israel and in Palestine: I will continue my fight for peace. She won't

have it any other way. She has the pugnaciousness and tenacity associated with the women of northern Morocco; she remains dignified, even when she doesn't find the arguments or answers satisfactory in conflict situations.

Cyril Brody

Many people have asked us if she doesn't risk being taken over. That's not for straight away! Latifa is extremely vigilant, including in her own organization: she's haunted by the idea of being dispossessed of an organization that bears her son's name, which can make her pretty distrustful of well-intentioned people. But she happily accepts invitations: everyone wants to have her, she knows that's the name of the game, she goes ahead.

One of the challenges of our film was also not to be afraid to show her limits, the obstacles before which she is sometimes powerless, the objections made to her, whether in good or bad faith. In this way we were better able to let her struggle be heard, to take account of her determination, of the immensity of the task that she has set herself and which in any case she cannot handle alone...

THIS FILM AND THE OTHERS

Olivier Peyon

Latifa is much sought after; her media presence is a key element in her organization's strategy. And in the specific case of our film, the Imad organization has a share in the receipts. So she willingly accepts proposals for films, and never says it will be counter-productive to have several films at the same time. We avoided a film by Al Jazeera and another one by NHK! On the other hand, at the beginning of filming we found ourselves with a team from France 2, which wasn't always easy. But we benefited above all from the time and freedom of documentaries produced for the cinema: we tracked Latifa for an entire year.

Cyril Brody

Latifa was in total ignorance of what a documentary is: for her everything is reporting. During the shooting we were able to spell out what we were doing. A movie for the cinema requires a great deal of time and money: if there had been another camera, we wouldn't have managed. And slowly but surely, at the same time as confidence grew, some areas opened up for us: the family and private part was in this way kept for us, her international side, the big trips to Israel, Palestine, China too. Yet she didn't always understand the need. She was happy that we came to the marriage of her son, but she couldn't see how that might help the film. What to her appeared crucial was not necessarily what interested us: for her, participation in an official, sumptuous ceremony was very important, whereas she saw no need to film her in her tiny office in Rouen. It was exactly this type of contrast that interested us. What happens and is said between two places, on the road, between two doors, rather than what was said officially from a lectern. Only time let us pick this up.

A FAMILY TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

Olivier Peyon

When her daughter compares Latifa to Gandhi, she clearly does not mean that to be taken at face value. She notes the effect her mother has, and adds immediately: we don't see her anymore. In other words: she has sacrificed her time with her children to go to see others. And this isn't wrong: she is no longer there for her family. When Latifa says the house is empty, she is in fact speaking about her own absence.

Cyril Brody

There's something moving about that. You need to imagine what it must be like to get up every morning to go to schools in the middle of the suburbs or of France. She has taken on herself a very harsh routine, by train, plane, car. She does it for her struggle, but not only: at the end of the day, when she sees these kids lining up to tell her something, to take a photo or to take her in their arms, it makes her feel really good. Something stirs in her when she no longer manages to cook for her own children, as she explained to us in China. Because doing something for them is doubtless to notice each time that one is missing. But to go see other young kids, to help youngsters whom she doesn't know, is to continue to commemorate her dead son.

Accompanying Latifa to China, as far removed from her as this project appeared, also meant for us to follow her with another of her children - Ilyasse - and partaking in a dinner during which it was evident how much life had changed, for the family and for Latifa. In capturing something of their love, being torn away from mourning by the discovery of the unknown, you touch the very heart of the paradox that is Latifa. She runs away from her grief and it always catches up with her. She perpetuates the memory of her son and at the same time discovers the world and is fed by it.

Latifa is always on the road, and since March 2012, her home is the road. Our film links with her the trips - train, plane or at the wheel of her own car on the roads of Morocco. It is in these moving spaces that her words often come to us. From the very beginning we wanted this march without an end, guided as much by the anguish of grief as by the need to get ahead of the problems in order to prevent them, because this movement lets us tell the story of France in 2017, its most dramatic and most urgent challenges, as well as its richness and its youth. Latifa was also a real guide for us.

ABOUT THE DIRECTORS

Having studied economics and then movie making, **Olivier Peyon** made 4 short films selected for many festivals, including: "Jingle Bells", in the competition at the 54th Mostra of Venice, "Claquage apres etirements" (Strains after stretches) in Clermont-Ferrand, and "A Tes Amours" (To your loves), which was among the prizewinners in New York. At the same time he translated for subtitles and dubbing of over 150 movies, including those of the Coen brothers (Fargo, The Big Lebowski, O'Brother, Intolerable Cruelty), and of Ken Loach, Stephen Frears, Danny Boyle, Jane Campion and others. In 2007 his first full-length movie came out, "Les petites vacances" (The little vacations) with Bernadette Lafont and Claude Brasseur. He made two documentaries for France 5 for the "Empreintes" series, about Élisabeth Badinter and Michel Onfray, and then in 2013 for the cinema "Comment j'ai deteste les maths" (How I hated math), nominated for a Caesar as best documentary. A third full-length movies shot in Uruguay, "Une vie ailleurs" (A life elsewhere), with Isabelle Carré and Ramzy Bédia, came out in March 2017.

Cyril Brody, scriptwriter and director, has worked with Olivier Peyon writing several of his films including "Les petites vacances". He has made several documentaries including "En service" (In service) (2007) in which he offers a service to his friends, a performance suited to thoughts about work, social exchanges and social links. Supported by Hors Pistes - Centre Pompidou Paris, the film received the Jury and Public Prize at the medium-length festival in Brive.

Direction assistant at the theater for national productions, he also made two films, "Lorient-Esprit" with 6 major playwrights of French contemporary theater (including Christophe Pellet, Fabrice Melquiot, David Lescot and others) and "Sur les pas de l'Academie" (In the steps of the Academy) about the work of Eric Vigner and actors from different backgrounds. He has made short films, including "Mar Vivo" (fiction - 2011) and "M'Diq", a documentary shot on a beach in Morocco in 2017.