



# Free Men

A film by Ismaël Ferroukhi

**"The French-Algerian actor has an undeniable screen presence that recalls a young Robert De Niro." - Jordan Mintzer, *The Hollywood Reporter***



**France / 2011 / Drama-War / French w. English Subtitles / 99 min. / 1.85:1 /  
Dolby SRD**

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## **SYNOPSIS**

1942, in German-occupied Paris. Younes, a young unemployed Algerian, earns his living as a black marketeer. Arrested by the French police but given a chance to avoid jail, Younes agrees to spy on the Paris Mosque. The police suspects the Mosque authorities, among which its rector Ben Ghabrit (played by Michael Lonsdale), of aiding Muslim Resistance agents, as well as helping North African Jews, by giving them false certificates. At the Mosque, Younes meets the Algerian singer Salim Halali, and is moved by Salim's beautiful voice and strong personality. A deep friendship develops, and soon after Younes discovers that Salim is Jewish. In spite of the risks it entails, Younes stops collaborating with the police, and gradually develops from being a politically ignorant immigrant worker into a fully-fledged freedom fighter.

## **FESTIVALS AND AWARDS**

### **OFFICIAL SELECTION:**

**TORONTO** Int'l Film Festival

**HAIFA** Int'l Film Festival

**ABU DHABI** Film festival

### **SPECIAL SCREENING**

**CANNES** Int'l Film Festival

## COMMENTS FROM THE DIRECTOR

### BIOGRAPHIES and FILMOGRAPHIES

#### Ismaël Ferroukhi - Director

He was born in Kenitra, Morocco. After directing his first short film, *L'Exposé*, in 1992, he co-wrote the script for Cédric Kahn's feature film *Trop de Bonheur* (1994). In 1995, he wrote and directed the short film *L'Inconnu*, which was part of the triptych "Court-toujours" produced for Canal Plus/Arte. He has also directed two films for television, *Akim* (1997) and *Petit Ben* (1998). *Le Grand Voyage* (2004) was his first feature film. He then directed a short film, *La Paire De Chaussure* and devoted his time to his second feature film : **FREE MEN**.

#### INTERVIEW

*How is the movie born?*

Everything started with a "Le Nouvel Observateur" article in which I read that the Mosque of Paris had hidden some members of the Resistance and Jews during World War II. After doing some research, I discovered that there was an important community of people from North Africa in Paris who had emigrated before the war. These people were working in factories; there were also Arabic cabarets, a Muslim hospital in Bobigny and a cemetery. I was really surprised since I had never heard of it before. Trying to find more information about Kaddour Ben Gabrit, creator and director of the Mosque, I discovered a generous but complex and deeply religious man. He was both reserved and open, being part of the Parisian life and also interested in music and art. Then a friend of mine told me that Ben Ghabrit saved his Jewish grandmother during the war. I wanted to write this story as soon as possible. "If Ben Ghabrit did not exist I would not be here today" said my friend who had never mentioned this before, though I've known him for years. This had a great impact on me.

*What kind of research did you perform?*

I worked with two historians: Benjamin Storam, specialist of the Maghreb region, and Pascal Le Pautremat, who has been working for years on the subject of Islam in France. I needed to be surrounded by experts to get historical documents. I wanted to have some historical and realistic background to be able to explore fiction after.

*Did you read particular books?*

The co-writer and I did read a lot of books about people from North Africa so that I could understand the nature of the relationship between the Maghreb Community and the Parisians. I also noticed that most of the Maghrebi workers were illiterate. Yet going to French factories they became members of Trade Unions and learned how to read and protect their Rights. After the discovery of militancy some of them became members of the Resistance or got involved in Politics. Their life conditions were hard. They were from a colonized country and had to undergo occupation in France. At the beginning, Younes refused to get into this war "which is not his war". Yet the context pushed him into it. I could have chosen something else, but I show that there were a lot of possibilities for him. To me, he is not a saint but a person full of humanity and sometimes ambiguous. He has a conscience even though it is repressed at the beginning. Bit by bit his conscience gives a reason for him to go on and to fight for Freedom as a final goal. I wanted a character who evolves and transforms himself while he goes through History. Since I wanted to be realistic, he had to progress gradually and undergo some doubtful periods where he could be tempted to change his mind. And after that, he would be able to have a strong opinion and be confident.

*How did you want to depict Ben Ghabrit?*

In the movie, he is a very discreet but complex character. He often sees the Ministers of the Vichy government, German officers, risking his life in order to save men and women who are in danger: Resistants, Jews, freedom fighters from North Africa...He knew how to be open minded and was very humane, without either talking about it or writing about it.

*Is the cemetery scene authentic?*

Many scenes are real, although it is above all a fiction. As Salim Hallali said throughout his life, there is indeed a grave with his father's name on it. It is a gravestone whose identity Ben Ghabrit changed in order to save him from deportation. It was a very strong moment that I wanted to include in the movie. This scene symbolizes a deep connection between Salim and Younes.

*How did the casting go?*

For Younes Character, I was looking for an actor who could impersonate all the personalities of the character I have created and that I had in mind. He is the center of the movie and it is through Younes that we are living this story. I am a very instinctive person and the first time I have met Tahar Rahim, I discovered a very generous person. We talked a lot about the character, his relation with others, his path, his questions. It was obvious that Tahar was the Ideal actor to play this role.

For Salim, I had looked for over a year for an actor that would fit the character. Luckily, the casting director has sent me an identity picture of Mahmoud Shalaby : immediately, I knew that he would be my character, because he had an unbelievably intense look. However, it was a little bit complicated to organize a

meeting with him because he lived in Israel. For the movie, he needed to speak French and Arabic, and he needed to be able to sing. When he came to Paris, I spent one afternoon with him, and understood that he could definitely play the role : He became Salim in my mind.

Regarding Ben Ghabrit, I was looking for a very subtle actor, who could show the complexity of the character while showing a deep spirituality. As I often said, Michael Losdale came from Heaven. We can immediately perceive that he embodies this soul that has strength without having to act. In the end, whatever one's religion is, this spiritual dimension is universal, and allows each of us to identify with the character, whatever our origins. The most surprising is that Michael's aunt was a very good friend of Ben Ghabrit. It was fate!

*Did you film in the Mosque of Paris?*

No, because we were denied access. So, we went to Morocco, because I knew that I would not find this type of setting in France. I focused on imperial cities, where we were able to find the most magical places. I began with Fes, but the light there was different than the light in Paris. I then went to Rabat, where I found an old palace—absolutely magnificent. It was incredible! I thought that I would have complete freedom to film, which I would have never had in the Mosque of Paris. And I needed freedom to film my movie.

*How did you work on the colors?*

At first, when we talked about colors and lightning with Jerome Almeras, the Chief operator, I did not really have any reference because that world was completely foreign to me. But I realized that, despite the coldness of an occupied Paris, I wanted a little bit of warmth throughout the cabarets, at the hotels, in the proximity between people, and the human warmth. I thus worked the contrast between warm colors and colder ones. This aesthetic recalls of Melville's "Armée des ombres" ("Army of Shadows") for some. I have often been told this, and I defend myself automatically. And after all, I admit: Melville's movie has influenced mine, more specifically in the choice of settings, and in the manner in which characters melt away in the streets of Paris.

*The music is at the heart of the film....*

I wanted music that would depict the inner world of the characters. During the first discussions with Armand Amar, the composer, I told him that I would like trumpet to accompany Younes. I thought that it was the instrument that would best represent best his state of mind, without necessarily explaining it with words or in a rational way. Therefore, Armand used my idea and made a few suggestions that I liked, in accordance with themes that we had chosen together. It is Ibrahim Maalouf, an exceptional Trumpet player, who suggested a very free interpretation.

*Who dubs Salim for the singing?*

It is Pinhas Cohen, a popular Moroccan singer. It really moves me since he represents today what Salim Hallali was at his time: the embodiment of the link between two communities. His voice is particular: he sings in Arabic but his music contains references to Jewish music.

*Was there, through Salim's character, any intention to pay tribute to Arab-Andalusian music?*

Absolutely. It was very important because this music portrays the connection between the three big monotheistic religions. Regarding Salim Hallali, I did not think I knew his music, until the day I listened to his compositions. I then realized that it was the music my parents used to listen to when I was a child. I was astonished to realize that I had known one of the characters of my movie since I was a child, and that his music was extremely popular.

## FILMOGRAPHY

- 2011 **FREE MEN**
- 2007 **LA PAIRE DE CHAUSSURE** (short)
- 2004 **LE GRAND VOYAGE**  
VENICE Film Festival 2004: "Golden Lion" for Best First Film  
NAMUR Film Festival 2004: Special Jury Prize of main Competition  
MAR DEL PLATA Film Festival 2005: Best Film, Best Actor (M. Majd)  
TEHERAN Film Festival 2005: Best Screenplay  
BAFTA 2005: Nominated for Best Foreign Film
- 1999 **PETIT BEN** (TV Film)  
7 d'Or 1999: Nominated for Best Director
- 1997 **AKIM** (TV Film)
- 1996 **L'INCONNU** (short)
- 1993 **L'EXPOSÉ** (short)  
CLERMONT FERRAND Short Film Festival 1993: Special Jury Prize  
CANNES Film Festival 1993:  
SACD Prize for best short film

## **TAHAR RAHIM – Actor**

Tahar Rahim (born 4 July 1981) is a French actor of Algerian origin. Born in Belfort, France, his family is originally from the region of Oran, Algeria. He is most notably known for his starring role as Malik El Djebena in the 2009 award-winning French movie *A Prophet* by Jacques Audiard. Rahim has demonstrated multilingual skills and an ear for accents, having played in Corsican and Arabic, in addition to French, in *A Prophet*, and in ancient Gaelic for his role as the seal prince in Kevin Macdonald's *The Eagle*. Rahim also stars in controversial Chinese director Lou Ye's latest movie *Love Bruises*.

### **FILMOGRAPHY**

- 2011        **FREE MEN**
- 2011        **COOL WATER**
- 2011        **BLACK GOLD**
- 2011        **LOVE BRUISES**
- 2011        **THE EAGLE**
- 2010        **YOU NEVER LEFT**
- 2009        **A PROPHET**
- 2007        **INSIDE**
- 2007        **LA COMMUNE**

## **MICHAEL LONSDALE – Actor**

Michael Lonsdale (born May 24, 1931), sometimes billed as Michel Lonsdale, is a French actor who has appeared in over 180 films and television shows. He moved to Paris to study painting in 1947 but was drawn in to the world of acting instead, first appearing on stage at the age of 24. Lonsdale is bilingual and is in demand for both English-language and French productions. He is best known in the English-speaking world for his roles as the villainous Sir Hugo Drax in the 1979 James Bond film *Moonraker*, the astute French detective Lebel in *The Day of the Jackal*, and M. Dupont d'Ivry in *The Remains of the Day*. In February of 2011 he won a Caesar award, his first, as a best supporting actor in *Of Gods and Men*.

### **SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY**

- 2011        **FREE MEN**
- 2010        **OF GODS AND MEN**
- 2009        **AGORA**
- 2006        **GOYA'S GHOSTS**
- 2005        **MUNICH**

- 2004        **5X2**
- 1998        **RONIN**
- 1986        **THE NAME OF THE ROSE**

## **LUBNA AZABAL – Actress**

Lubna Azabal is a Belgian actress. After studying at the Conservatoire Royal of Brussels, she began a theatrical career in Belgium. In 1997, she took her first film role when Belgian film-maker Vincent Lannoo chose her to act beside Olivier Gourmet in his short film *J'adore le cinema*. She performs in both French and Arabic films. She was raised trilingual (French, Spanish and Berber). She also speaks fluent English and Arabic. Her most widely known role is in the 2005 Golden Globe-winning Palestinian political thriller *Paradise Now*. She can also be spotted in a smaller role in Ridley Scott's recent film *Body of Lies*. Azabal won the Black Pearl Award 2010 (Abu Dhabi Film Festival) for Best Actress for her role in the film *Incendies*. She also won the Genie Award for Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role at the 31st Genie Awards.

### **SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY**

- 2011        **FREE MEN**
- 2011        **CORIOLANUS**
- 2011        **HERE**
- 2010        **I AM SLAVE**
- 2010        **INCENDIES**
- 2007        **STRANGERS**
- 2005        **PARADISE NOW**
- 2004        **VIVA LALDJÉRIE**
- 2004        **CHANGING TIMES**

## **MAHMOUD SHALABY**

Arab-Israeli actor.

### **FILMOGRAPHY**

- 2011        **FREE MEN**
- 2008        **JAFFA**



## **CREDITS**

### **CREW**

<b>Director</b>	ISMAËL FERROUKHI
<b>Producers</b>	FABIENNE VONIER
<b>Production Company</b>	PYRAMIDE PRODUCTIONS
<b>Co-Production Company</b>	SOLAIRE PRODUCTION / VMP
	FRANCE 3 CINÉMA
<b>Script</b>	ISMAËL FERROUKHI, ALAIN-MICHEL BLANC
<b>Music</b>	ARMAND AMAR
<b>Costumes</b>	VIRGINIE MONTEL
<b>Editor</b>	ANNETTE DUTERTRE
<b>Director of Photography</b>	JÉRÔME ALMÉRAS A.F.C
<b>Sound Editors</b>	JEAN-PAUL MUGEL, SÉVERIN FAVRIAU, STÉPHANE THIÉBAUD
<b>Designer</b>	LUCA SERVINO

### **CAST**

<b>Younes</b>	TAHAR RAHIM
<b>Si Kaddour Ben Ghabrit</b>	MICHAEL LONSDALE
<b>Salim</b>	MAHMOUD SHALABY
<b>Leila</b>	LUBNA AZABAL
<b>Major Von Ratibor</b>	CHRISTOPHER BUCHHOLZ