



SEEN & HEARD

# Divines

## Director Houda Benyamina on 'Divines'

In French director Houda Benyamina's feature-length debut *Divines*, Dounia (Oulaya Amamra) and Maimouna (Déborah Lukumuena) are schoolfriends who turn to a life of crime in a bid to escape the *banlieues*. With their physical comedy and contrasting little-and-large builds, Dounia and Maimouna have been described by Benyamina as her very own Laurel and Hardy. But an even more accurate comparison might be Robert De Niro and Harvey Keitel in *Mean Streets* (1973), both in the way their respective straight man and comic relief relationship plays out, and in the pathos and melodrama at the core of their friendship.

The self-schooled director, who was previously an acting coach at the workshop she founded in 2006 (1000 Visages), received the Camera d'Or for best first feature at Cannes this year. Inspired by the restless energy that fuelled the Paris riots in 2005 and touched by a documentary she once saw that featured two female prison inmates dancing in front of the police, Benyamina decided to channel the disillusionment and dissent of the city's underclass into a restless story of personal protest. An often gritty urban drama, *Divines* may invite comparison with recent *banlieue*-set films like Céline Sciamma's *Girlhood* (2014) or Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* (1995), but Benyamina's film, with its tough-talking heroines and fiery climax, is unabashedly populist in tone.

*You've said Laurel and Hardy inspired the characters. Were there any other influences?*

When I was a child my best friend looked physically a bit like Maimouna's character. We often messed about and found ourselves in quite funny burlesque situations, so I wanted to recreate that.

*Does that mean you were like Dounia when you were younger?*

When I was younger – I mean, I still do – I felt like a bit of an outsider, which fed into feelings of injustice, of rebellion, of wanting to assert myself. The need for recognition and acceptance is where I recognise myself in Dounia's character. Dounia doesn't want to just exist in the world; she wants to be looked at. She's also a character who looks at men.

*Was the female gaze something you actively tried to explore?*

That's exactly something I wanted to show. Grace and sensuality are things that men have as much as women – and women can express desire and sexuality in the same way men can.

*How did you come up with the scene that sees the girls drive an imaginary Ferrari?*

The way I develop a story is an ongoing back and forth between script and performance. For the Ferrari scene and the scene where they all shout, 'Money money money' – that's all inspired by my little brother, who told me a dream he had. It made me think that that's what young people these days dream about. I love Ken Loach, but I didn't really want to go for social realism. I wanted to inject a bit of magic.

*How did you find the two lead actresses and build the chemistry between them?*

Oulaya [Amamra] is actually my little sister. I didn't really want her to play this part because I didn't feel she was right for the role because she had a very different upbringing to me. We put her in a private Catholic school and she did ballet... She's very feminine, very sensitive and she didn't have this tough exterior that Dounia should have. But she really proved herself; she took up boxing, she became quite insolent, she was expelled from her school! She increasingly embodied Dounia's character. Also, I trained her as an actress when she was young – I used to teach theatre, so [I knew] she was technically skilled.

The actors were immersed in the universe that they were made to act in. They slept in a Roma camp, they took up boxing and I made them spend a lot of time together, playing with mobile phones and filming each other, so they developed this natural friendship in the end.

*Why did you choose to include mobile phone footage in the opening credits?*

The phones embody how young people communicate today; the way they use Snapchat stories to document and stage their own lives – they're actors in their own lives. I liked using this device to show the way she falls in act three – aesthetically it was the right thing to do.

*From Dounia's Taxi Driver imitation to the scene where her body is covered in cash, there are several nods to Scorsese. What were some of your other cinematic reference points?*

My references are from across the world and across the board. Some of my inspiration comes from filmmakers like Ettore Scola, [Pier Paolo] Pasolini, [Jean-Pierre] Melville, and you're right about the references to Scorsese. His particular interest in the power of money and the power of the sacred [is something] I really identify with.

*This film is being distributed through Netflix. Do you think it's still important to show films in the cinema?*

When I first heard the Netflix offer I thought, 'Right, my film's not going to be screened in cinemas,' and for me that wasn't necessarily a good thing. But then I realised what it actually meant to have a film in cinemas, in the jungle that is the world of cinema distribution, where if you don't have enough entries, enough seats booked, they close you down after two weeks. What the Netflix deal has allowed is for this film to be distributed in 130 countries to 83 million people, and no distributor would've been able to do that. I'm not a snob; I really want the film to be seen. And what Netflix has allowed is a real democratisation of film. It's made it accessible, especially to young people who only really watch their films on tablets or on their phones. And also cinema tends to be quite expensive – I feel it gives people the opportunity to see these films.

**Interview by Simran Hans, *Sight & Sound*, December 2016**

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## DIVINES

*Director:* Houda Benyamina  
*Production Company:* Easy Tiger  
*Executive Producer:* Funa Maduka  
*Producer:* Marc-Benoît Créancier  
*Casting:* Pierre-François Créancier, Sandra Durando  
*Screenplay:* Houda Benyamina, Romain Compingt, Malik Rumeau  
*Director of Photography:* Julien Poupard  
*Editors:* Loïc Lallemand, Vincent Tricon  
*Art Director:* Marion Burger  
*Costume Designer:* Alice Cambournac  
*Music:* Demusmaker  
*Music Supervisor:* Martin Caraux

## Cast

Oulaya Amamra (*Dounia*)  
Déborah Lukumuena (*Maimouna*)  
Kevin Mischel (as Kevin Mishel) (*Djigui*)  
Jisca Kalvanda (*Rebecca*)  
Yasin Houicha (*Samir*)  
Majdouline Idriss (*Myriam*)  
Bass Dhem (*Mr Camara*)  
Mounir Margoum (*Cassandra*)  
Farid Larbi (*Reda*)  
Mariama Soumaré (*Mrs Camara*)

France/Qatar 2016  
105 mins

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## SEEN & HEARD: DARING FEMALE COMING-OF-AGE FILMS

### Skate Kitchen

Tue 1 Mar 20:40; Sun 13 Mar 20:45

### Divines

Wed 2 Mar 20:50; Tue 15 Mar 20:50

### Jinn

Sat 5 Mar 17:45; Tue 8 Mar 21:00

### 37 Seconds (37 sekanzu)

Sat 5 Mar 20:30; Sat 12 Mar 20:45

### Water Lilies (Naissance des pieuvres)

Sun 6 Mar 18:45; Mon 14 Mar 20:50

### Marie Antoinette

Tue 8 Mar 18:10 (+ intro by Hannah Strong, Little White Lies Digital Editor and author of *Sofia Coppola: Forever Young*); Sun 13 Mar 18:00

### Somersault

Fri 11 Mar 20:50; Mon 14 Mar 18:10

## IN THE EYES OF A SILENT STAR: THE FILMS OF ASTA NIELSEN

### In the Eyes of the Law (Nach dem Gesetz)

Tue 1 Mar 20:50; Mon 7 Mar 18:15

### Hamlet

Wed 2 Mar 18:15; Sat 5 Mar 17:00 (+ Intro by Prof Judith Buchanan)

### Earth Spirit (Erdgeist)

Sat 5 Mar 12:10 (+ intro by Season Curator Pamela Hutchinson); Wed 9 Mar 20:50

### The Decline (AKA Downfall) (Der Absturz)

Sat 5 Mar 14:30 (+ intro by season curator Pamela Hutchinson); Tue 15 Mar 18:20

### The Joyless Street (Die freudlose Gasse)

Sun 6 Mar 17:40 (+ intro by BFI Inclusion Team Coordinator, Miranda Gower-Qian); Wed 16 Mar 18:00

### Impossible Love (Unmögliche Liebe)

Wed 9 Mar 18:20; Tue 15 Mar 20:45

## THE CAMERA IS OURS:

### BRITAIN'S WOMEN DOCUMENTARY MAKERS

#### From Beside the Seaside to the English Inn: Restoration Programme 1 + intro by BFI curator Ros Cranston

Thu 3 Mar 18:15

#### For Sama + intro by director Waad Al-Kateab + Children of the Ruins

Thu 3 Mar 20:30

#### The Camera Is Ours: Study Day + Independent Miss Craigie + Q&A with director Lizzie Thynne and producer Hollie Price

Sat 5 Mar 12:00-17:00

#### From the Sea to the Land Beyond

Sat 5 Mar 18:15

#### Seniors Free Archive Matinee: White Riot + discussion

Mon 7 Mar 14:00

#### Cow

Tue 8 Mar 20:40

#### The Hermit of Treig + Q&A with director Lizzie MacKenzie

Fri 11 Mar 18:10

#### From Birth-Day to Something Nice to Eat: Restoration Programme 2 + intro by BFI curator Ros Cranston

Mon 14 Mar 18:15

#### Hostile + director Sonita Gale in conversation with journalist Jon Snow

Tue 15 Mar 18:00

## NEW RELEASES

### La Mif (The Fam)

Continues from Fri 25 Feb

### Rebel Dread

From Fri 4 Mar

### Ali & Ava

From Fri 11 Mar; Tue 15 March 14:00 Seniors' matinee + discussion

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