



## PREVIEW

# The Damned Don't Cry

+ Q&A with director Fyza Boulifa

### The Damned Don't Cry (Les damnés ne pleurent pas)

Director: Fyza Boulifa

©: Vixens

Produced by: Gary Farkas, Clement Lepoutre,  
Olivier Muller

Screenplay: Fyza Boulifa

In consultation with: Rungano Nyoni,  
Gabriel Gauchet

Director of Photography: Caroline Champetier

Editor: François Quiquere

Art Director: Samuel Charbonnot

Costume Designer: Cecile Manokoune

Hair and Make-up Designer: Anne Caramagnol

Original Music: Nadah El Shazly

Sound: Bruno Schweitzguyh, Ingrid Ralet,

Emmanuel de Boissieu

Cast:

Aïcha Tebbae (*Fatima-Zahra*)

Abdellah El Hajjouji (*Selim*)

Antoine Reinartz (*Sébastien*)

Moustapha Mokafih (*Moustapha*)

Walid Chaïbi (*Abdou*)

Sawsen Kotbi (*Tourita*)

Samira Oferighe (*Aïcha*)

Jonathan Genet (*Edouard*)

Ikram Elamghari (*Nizna*)

Souad Charaf (*Naima*)

France-Belgium-Morocco-UK 2022©

110 mins

Courtesy of Curzon

*Lynn + Lucy*, the superb 2019 feature debut from Moroccan-British filmmaker Fyza Boulifa, was powered by the strange, neon-lit energy given off in the unexpected collision between British kitchen-sink realism and Fassbinder-Sirkian melodrama. Boulifa's fascinating follow-up, *The Damned Don't Cry*, is perhaps an even more ambitious hybrid. The gloriously gaudy melodrama notes remain – the title is a nod to a 1950s Joan Crawford vehicle – but the milieu is now Morocco, the margins of Tangier, to be precise, where homosexuality is illegal, respectability is unrecoverable and even the slightest upward social mobility is essentially the stuff of fantasy. Here, poverty conspires with patriarchy: if one doesn't get you, the other will.

The only solution, and it's a temporary fix at best, is to keep moving. Hence the peripatetic existence led by Fatima-Zahra (Aïcha Tebbae), a middle-aged, single-mother sex worker with a penchant for thick make-up and abundant jewellery, and perhaps a little too much desperate faith in her waning talent for coquetry. When her latest assignation ends in humiliation and violence, she and her son Selim (Abdellah El Hajjouji), a teenager with whom she has an almost lover-like relationship, have to pack up and move from the tiny room where they share a flophouse mattress. They do it with the practised resignation of people for whom it is a routine.

But their next stop proves even less fruitful, as Fatima-Zahra returns to her native village and is received rather frostily by the family she had left so long before in pursuit of a more glamorous life. This notion of 'glamour', incidentally, is one of the character's most peculiar and compelling traits; her arc might be partially based on Anna Magnani's in Pasolini's *Mamma Roma* (1962), but Fatima-Zahra has evolved a coping mechanism all her own, cherishing a misbegotten, heartbreaking, oddly admirable attachment to the notion that her life of struggle and prostitution is somehow grand and romantic. Mother and son move again, to Tangier, with their only change in circumstance being that Selim, having overheard the cruel truth about his paternity, is newly determined to disengage from his mother.

Reflecting their increasing estrangement, the film splits into a dual narrative as Fatima-Zahra strives for contentment and precarious social standing as the prospective second wife to pious, married bus driver Moustapha (Moustapha Mokafih). Meanwhile, Selim finds a route to independence, or rather a new kind of co-dependence, through Sébastien (Antoine Reinartz), a wealthy Frenchman who first hires the uncomprehending young man solely for sex, and then, partly as an apology for that ugly encounter, brings him on as a live-in housekeeper in his luxurious riad. Fortunes change, and our sympathies pivot, but Boulifa's tight, terse script is not so rigid that it doesn't find room for everyone's humanity. Where it would have been simpler to make Sébastien a monster of privileged predation, here he is kind, albeit in that easy way that rich people can be kind to their social inferiors. The concentrated, slightly awed expression Selim wears as Sébastien teaches him about the various plants he has bought for the riad's rooftop garden, is a small essay in itself. No one, it implies, has ever taken the time before to talk to Selim about horticulture, or any other kind of culture.

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### Woman with a Movie Camera: The Apple (Sib)

+ intro by Programmer Jelena Milosavljevic

Thu 6 Jul 18:10

### Projecting the Archive: Son of a Stranger

+ intro by Josephine Botting, BFI Curator

Tue 11 Jul 18:15

### Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI

Mon 17 Jul 18:30

### Experimenta: Nico Night Part 1: Solitude +

Nina Danino in conversation with BFI National

Archive curator William Fowler + Key

Wed 19 Jul 18:15

### Experimenta: Nico Night Part 2: The Inner Scar

(AKA La Cicatrice Intérieure) + intro

Wed 19 Jul 20:30

### African Odysseys:

Passing Through + intro & Q&A

Sat 22 Jul 14:00

### African Odysseys: Wattstax + intro

Sat 22 Jul 18:10

### Seniors' Free Matinee: Summertime

(aka Summer Madness) + intro

Mon 24 Jul 14:00

### Art in the Making: Sickert's London + intro by

historian, writer and artist Kate Aspinall +

Walter Sickert: Painter of the Third Floor Back

Tue 25 Jul 18:10

### 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Screening: The World's End

+ Q&A with Edgar Wright, Simon Pegg and

Nick Frost

Thu 27 Jul 17:50

### Silent Cinema: The Signal Tower

+ intro by film historian Kevin Brownlow

Sun 30 Jul 15:40

### Relaxed Screening:

Fantasia + intro and discussion

Mon 31 Jul 18:00

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If the twists and turns of this increasingly saga-ish plot veer toward the soap operatic, there is always the steady, expressive but not obtrusive composure of Caroline Champetier's cinematography to reveal the ache beneath the artifice. Similarly, Egyptian musician Nadah El Shazly's score works as a finely calibrated counterbalance, becoming lush and more classical when the story is at its grittiest, and even resolving into its most melodic moment at just the point that the characters are flying apart in opposite directions. And beyond these impressive technical credentials, there are the performances. As Selim, first-time actor El Hajjouji, with his suspicious but vulnerable gaze and sulky, sweetheart pout, is the kind of find that would be any other film's main casting coup. But Tebbae, also making her acting debut, steals the show as Fatima-Zahra, somehow becoming the archetype of the Mildred Pierce-style fallen-woman-desperate-to-make-good, while also being so strange in her sly glances and vivid, wholly delusional interior life that she is no kind of type at all. Only two features into his career, Boulifa has already established his own, kaleidoscopically humane storytelling style, where a deep and mischievous knowledge of cinematic tradition is deployed against acutely current social issues, briefly but brilliantly dragging centre-stage lives more usually lived on the very edge of everything.

Jessica Kiang, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 2023

Fyzal Boulifa's film borrows its title from a lesser-known entry in the filmography of the great Joan Crawford, and aspects of its visual style from other female-led potboilers of that time. Vincent Sherman's *The Damned Don't Cry* (1950) was inspired by the relationship between the gangster Bugsy Siegel and his girlfriend Virginia Hill – 'Meet the Private Lady of a Public Enemy', runs one tagline.

Fyzal Boulifa: 'Joan Crawford plays a housewife who lives in a poor town in America. Her young son is killed, and she decides she doesn't like anything about her life, doesn't like her husband or her family, and she decides to leave, and recreates herself in the city. She becomes a shop girl, and a model, then a prostitute, a gangster, a society lady – she goes through all these different metamorphoses... There's something in that title that I knew was at the core of my film: it was about survival. The title is a very beautiful expression of what it means to survive, and of the nature of the characters. I didn't want them to be victims, despite everything. So it's a kind of statement of intent. It's fashionable in screenwriting to take the approach that we have to like and relate to a character, and therefore they have to be a victim, and that's the very thing I didn't want to do.'

The look of the film came from the tension between working with non-professionals, and these influences from older melodrama. I wanted that richness of image. That was about giving the characters some dignity – not insisting through the image on squalor or hardship. I was working with Caroline Champetier, who's a very, very established director of photography [*Ponette*, 1996; *Of Gods and Men*, 2010; *Holy Motors*, 2012; *Annette*, 2021], and a lot of that melodramatic, almost Technicolor vibe came from the way that Caroline treated the colours, which has a real richness, and also a kitsch element.'

Interview by Hannah McGill, *Sight and Sound*, Summer 2023