

ALGIERS IN PARIS

An Algerian smuggles haute couture out of France in Merzak Allouache's new film, shot in a bomb-menaced Paris. By Hadani Ditmars

Dramas of arrival: Algerian adventures in Paris. In Merzak Allouache's comedy 'Salut Cousin!'



● When Merzak Allouache was writing the scenario for his new film *Salut Cousin!*, he was anticipating a calmer environment than the dangerous chaos of Algiers under curfew that *Bab El-Oued City* was made in, in 1993. Now he finds himself shooting at the height of a campaign of terrorist bombings in Paris, and often in neighbourhoods smouldering with the tension of racism and poverty – the malaise of the *banlieue*. But this time, his film's a comedy.

Salut Cousin! tells the story of Alilo (Gad Elmaleh), a young Algerian who comes to Paris to visit his cousin Mok (Messaoud Hattou), and falls in love with a beautiful Guinean woman, Fatoumata (Magaly Berdy); and it begins where *Bab El-Oued City* ends. Just as the young hero of that film sails away from Algiers, to seek his fortune elsewhere, so Alilo of *Salut Cousin!* comes to France hoping to earn some money smuggling *haute couture* dresses.

But it seems that neither Allouache nor his characters can shake off the violence of their homeland. It has followed them to France. So far, Allouache has had to make several script changes because of security restrictions. What

could have been a comic-tragic scene where Mok demonstrates his uncanny ability to impersonate a Bosnian refugee begging in the *métro* has been cut, since it became a terrorist target. Similarly, the final airport scene where Alilo bids farewell to Fatoumata – only to have his suitcase blown up by suspicious airport security staff – has had a major rewrite. After recent events, Charles de Gaulle airport was impossible, so a train station had to suffice. But when they filmed at Gare du Nord last month, they were set upon by violent SDF – homeless people, *sans domicile fixe* – who resented their presence.

The atmosphere in Paris these days is tense, to say the least. Central *métro* stations are full of soldiers with machine guns, and some of the working-class neighbourhoods and suburbs they are filming in feel like urban war zones. Violence in the *banlieue* is increasing; *vigilante* police controls (to check passports and identity papers) are everywhere, and the Minister of Public Security has recently issued police in these areas with rubber bullets and bullet-proof vests.

The distance from Bab El-Oued to the Parisian *banlieue*, it seems, is not so far. Even

some of the actors from Allouache's previous films have resurfaced. Mohammed Ourdache, who played the bearded Islamist in *Bab El-Oued City*, appears in *Salut Cousin!* as a policeman who has fled Algeria for the relative safety of Paris. Alilo finds his old friend and neighbour selling "lambada" musical alarm clocks in Belleville (a popular North African area of Paris). They go for a drink to reminisce about Algiers. Days later the former policeman is deported.

And Messaoud Hattou, who last time played the young *beur* (second-generation Algerian) deported back to Bab El-Oued when he loses his passport, is now Mok, the *beur* cousin of Alilo, who receives the rather culture-shocked young man into the confused chaos of his 'integrated' life in France. Much to Alilo's bewilderment, Mok is estranged from his family, has a French girlfriend, and is on the run from both a local Mafioso thug and the French authorities, who are threatening to deport him.

But the 'bad guys' are not just this thug and the police; there are radical *lepenistes* to contend with too. In a scene which neatly ties in love, violence and racial solidarity, Alilo saves Fatou-



mata from a group of skinheads who attack her in a phone booth. In *Bab El-Oued City* it was Islamic fundamentalism that posed an obstacle for young lovers. In *Salut Cousin!*, Parisian realities threaten: racism and deportation orders.

Alilo has also to find his Parisian contact, who will supply him with a suitcase full of dresses to smuggle back home. But he has lost the supplier's phone-number and his boss in Algiers, whom he is anxious to impress, is never available by phone. Meanwhile, Mok tries to dodge deportation and to stay alive in Paris through various schemes and adventures. Both cousins are really just trying to survive.

Indeed, Allouache says that his intention in making the film is to show the difficult realities for young Algerians on "both sides of the Mediterranean". While *Salut Cousin!* explores the gravity of these realities, it approaches them with an ironic humour already hinted at in *Bab El-Oued City* (for example in the mock sentimentality with which Messaoud Hattou evokes the Parisian *banlieue* of Bobigny).

Moving freely from the sublime to the ridiculous, Allouache has Mok enter a rap contest

with his 'original' composition: La Fontaine's verse-translation of Aesop's 'Fox and Grapes' fable, set to a mean backbeat. An ironic jab at the perils of cultural *métissage* (blending), the subplot keenly observes the delicate position of young *beurs* caught between two cultures.

In another subplot, Mok acts as the groom in a 'paper wedding' to an Algerian girl. The wedding scene is a tongue-in-cheek nod to the tacky excesses of Parisian North African flash – women in frilly over-the-top *couture* imitations, men decked out in gold chains and shiny patent shoes. But later, when Mok's real motivation for performing the wedding comes to light – he needs the money to pay for the medical bills of a friend injured in a car accident – there is a moment of serious drama.

The film ends in tragicomic irony, as Alilo, in love with Fatoumata, decides to stay in Paris, and phones his cousin Mok from the airport. But he only gets an answering machine, as Mok has been deported (due to bureaucratic skulduggery) by French authorities and is on his way to Algiers. In a Paris where the recent *vigipirate* controls have meant deportation for many

an illegal immigrant, Allouache dances lightly between humour and melodrama.

He insists that he is merely continuing the narrative of his young Algerian anti-heroes which began with *Omar Gatlato* in 1976, only now he's on the other side of the Mediterranean. But in his exploration of *beur* reality, he is in the company of such Paris-based film-makers as Malik Chibane (whose film *Douce France* is soon to be released) and even Mathieu Kassovitz, whose *La Haine* is an emblem of the *malaise de banlieue*. Another link is the unabashed celebration of adolescent male machismo. The work of Chibane and Kassovitz lends itself to comparisons with such black American films as *Boyz n The Hood*, while Allouache's portrayals of tough urban neighbourhoods owe more to Elia Kazan and 50s America gangland films, but this difference in inspiration is merely generational.

(There are some second-generation Algerian women film-makers in France beginning to explore the feminine reality of *beur* experience: one thinks of Zaida Ghorab-Volta and her short, *Souviens-toi de moi*, or the work of Rashida Krim. But the terrain remains a male-dominated one.)

The romantic subplots in *Salut Cousin!* are interesting in that they deal with mixed-race couples: Alilo falls in love with a beautiful Guinean woman, Mok's girlfriend is French. But the film remains essentially a 'buddy flick', an (Algerian) Boys' Own adventure in Paris.

The first day that I visit the set, Allouache is directing the scene in which Mok competes in the rap contest. On the way to the *banlieue* location, my *métro* journey is rerouted, because of a "suspicious package on the Marie De Montreuil line". After a long, tense trip through alternative underground lines, I arrive in Clichy, a nondescript suburban area with all the surface trappings of French life: a Felix Potin chainstore, a church, a post office, but there is a slight twilight-zone feeling that all is not quite as it seems; something's moving underneath the exterior. I notice little old ladies walking poodles, young black boys wearing baseball caps and Malcolm X T-shirts, a video store full of Schwarzenegger posters. I ask directions in a corner *tabac* where the locals are drinking. Apparently they have not noticed that a movie (with 200 extras today) is being filmed in their neighbourhood. No, they have never heard of Merzak Allouache. But they point me in the right direction of Number One Rue Mederic.

Eventually I find the set, a community centre which betrays its location by a huge truck and a handful of local police hanging around it. I am ushered into a party room full of a few hundred "homeboys" (in addition to Schwarzenegger videos, American street lingo has also seeped into *banlieue* consciousness). Most are black, some are North African; almost everyone is dressed American, in baseball caps and trainers. There are some token girls, and mean-looking rottweilers on chains. The atmosphere is one of ordered, even orchestrated chaos.

I am passed around to various production assistants and pretty, blonde French girls who appear to be there to make coffee and offer backcrubs to tired directors. The air is thick with cigarette smoke. You can practically smell the testosterone. I am politely ignored and ►

◀ retreat to the sidelines to observe the rap scene. As the crew sets up the shot for the big finale, where Mok sings of the Fox and the Grapes, a group of extras start to do a rap/hip-hop/breakdance thing in the middle of the floor while the dogs bark and the girls squeal. I walk over to them and strike up a conversation with Max-Laure, a young dancer who tells me she has already appeared in a few MC Solaar videos. Today, she and scores of other young hopefuls are getting paid 40 quid to look like they're having a good time. They're mainly kids from the *banlieue*, found by casting directors on the street or in clubs, or lured by newspaper ads or word of mouth. Most that I talk to seem to be unaware of *Bab El-Oued City*, Algerian politics, and, until very recently, even Merzak Allouache.

Allouache himself appears a tiny creature, almost lost in the crowd. He sits by the stage conferring with his cameraman and surveying the scene. As in *Bab El-Oued City*, he has chosen to work with young unknowns: their energy and enthusiasm, he says, add a fresh quality to their acting performances.

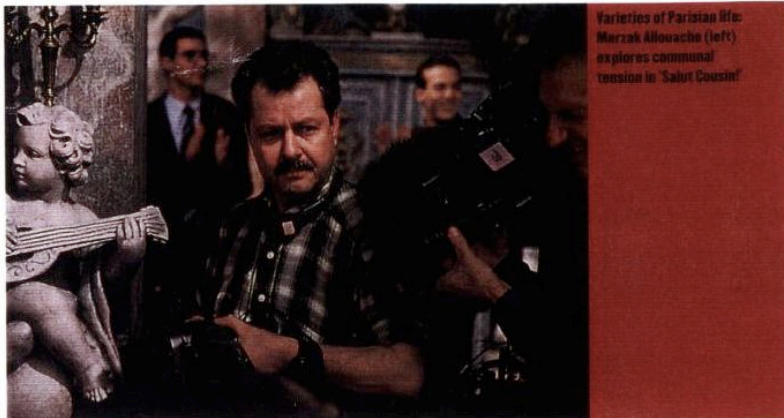
"Has it all been too chaotic today?" I ask him. "No, no, it's been going really well," he assures me. They are even ahead of schedule. Amidst all the youthful exuberance and barking rottweilers, he seems in his element. Despite the very real fear that pervaded the production of *Bab El-Oued City*, he seems to find a little chaos creatively inspiring.

I meet up with some young *beurs* who hail from Mantes la Jolie – one of the *banlieue* areas where there have been recent violent flareups. They are running a community theatre group which aims to vent pent-up youthful rage in a dramatic yet peaceful way. In *Salut Cousin!*, they are playing a couple of guys in the crowd, but one day they say, they hope to make their own film about the *banlieue*.

Soon it's time for the cameras to roll, and Messaoud jumps up onto the makeshift stage and starts rapping. He is accompanied by a reggae/rai band from Grenoble called Gnawa Diffusion – dreadlocked young *beurs* with earrings in their noses – who come across like Arab grunge icons. Messaoud jumps and spins in a comic rap parody, and the crowd boos on cue. The camera comes in close for a tight shot: Messaoud struts his stuff in a wool hat and Adidas trainers, like an Algerian slacker-generation Jerry Lewis. With his wild, Marty Feldman eyes, impossibly kinky hair, and his unique, very physical comic style, he could easily be a visitor from another planet.

After the third and final take, I speak to some real rappers, a group of black homeboys from Aubervilliers (another *banlieue* outside of Paris). How did they rate Messaoud's performance? "Well," they shrug, rather bewildered by the La Fontaine reference and Messaoud's funny chicken walk, "It's only a film."

Another crowd shot is needed, and they quickly slip back into their hip, cinematic poses, dancing and shouting with the girls and the rottweilers *et al* and soon there is a real sense of raw energy in the room. A wide camera shot tried to capture the feeling and one wonders how this will compare with the vibrant street scenes of *Bab El-Oued City*. After the take is done, Allouache stands back from the crowd scene



Varieties of Parisian life: Merzak Allouache (left) explores communal tension in 'Salut Cousin!'

and smiles a tough-guy grin. He looks pleased.

Several days later, I meet up with his crew filming in a popular neighbourhood of the 18ème. There is a certain charm to the area – traditionally a working-class *quartier* populated by North and West African, Italian and Portuguese migrants. I mention this to one of the crew members, who tells me that the turn-of-the-century buildings where the shoot is taking place are slated for demolition in 72 hours time.

Neighbourhood kids swarm around the set, watching the buildings in their floodlit last moments of glory, recorded for posterity on celluloid. Omar, on a bicycle, and Khaled, in trainers and baseball cap, ask if they can be in the film. One of the blonde girls tells them to talk to Bruno, the casting director. They are encouraged by this, but not satisfied. They want a personal introduction. Come by tomorrow, she says. The future stars go home smiling.

I run into Mohammed Ourdache, who plays the policeman, today playing the real-life role of art director. The Allouache tribe is tightly knit. Even Saffy Boutella, the Algerian composer who wrote the score for the film, gets a cameo as a piano player in a bar. Eventually, even I get approached about a walk-on role in the wed-

Before the take, a passing car emits a loud bang. There is nervous excitement

ding scene (Mok's 'paper marriage' for money). This is not so much cinema as *gestalt*.

The crew is preparing to shoot the scene where Mok and Aliilo return home to find Claude the villainous thug in a red sports car, waiting for them. Mok owes him money and he has come to claim it. But when he treats Mok a bit roughly, his cousin comes to his defence. The scene's choreographed violence recalls the confrontation between the young hero in *Bab El-Oued City* and the Islamist gang. Both scenes allude to Hollywood – although *West Side Story* as much as *Boyz n the Hood*.

Allouache goes through the scene with his cinematographer, Pierre Aim. He wants precise, tight camera angles. It's getting dark and there is a nice, atmospheric light. The scenario starts to look cinematically familiar. Squint a little and the old French buildings slated for demoli-

tion could be New York tenements. I half-expect Maria to appear on a balcony and start singing: "There's gonna be a rumble tonight."

Despite the chaotic, tribal elements in Allouache's cinematic entourage, it is clear that the director is in control. In contrast to his vaguely laissez-faire attitude in the rap scene, he now becomes quite rigid, demanding perfection of his actors and crew. Before the first take, Allouache has the crew and cast go through the scene again and again. He explores different camera angles, searching for the right image, while the actors rehearse their stagefighting techniques. The scene is not a long one, but it must be executed with speed and precision.

Just before the first take, a car drives by and emits a loud bang. There is momentary nervous excitement, until everyone realises that it was just an exploded radiator. The shoot continues. After several takes, there is a break and I sit down for a coffee with Allouache. He seems exhausted – from the tension of filming in a siege-mentality Paris as much as the shoot itself. Even the romantic scene between Aliilo and Fatoumata at the foot of the Eiffel Tower had to be rewritten to a less "dangerous" location.

Allouache's position is not easy. In a way, the in-between-two-worlds status of his film's young heroes mirrors his own reality. Return to Algeria is not a viable option, as much for practical as for security reasons. After all, most of the money for *Salut Cousin!* (a loose co-production funded by Arte and Canal +, as well as Belgian and Luxembourg interests) was French. And although some young Algerians consider his age and connection to a certain cultural elite make him complicit with the old regime, he is regarded by others as a real *mec du quartier* – a local hero true to his working-class roots, and a friend of the struggling young Algerian anti-hero – whether in Bab El-Oued or Belleville.

But, insists Allouache, his *séjour* in Paris is not permanent: "I'm still hoping to return to my country," he says.

Tonight, on the eve of the summit between Algeria's soon-to-be-re-elected Liamine Zeroul and Jacques Chirac (which Chirac in the event cancelled), the crew will film well into the night. I take a last look at the old building that I will never see again. There goes another neighbourhood, I think. As I walk to the station to catch the last *métro*, a siren wails in the distance.