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# DACHRA

an ABDELHAMID BOUCHNAK picture

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## Synopsis

Set against the backdrop of contemporary Tunisia, the feature revolves around female journalism student Yasmin and two male classmates who set out on a university assignment to solve the cold case of Mongia, a woman found mutilated 25 years ago and now imprisoned in an asylum, suspected of witchcraft.

As they pursue their investigation, the three friends stumble into the archaic and ominous world of Dachra, an isolated countryside compound filled with goats, silent women, mysterious drying meat and steaming pots, which is home to a cult.

When the cult's jovial but menacing leader invites them to stay overnight, Yasmin is drawn into Dachra's dark secrets and a desperate attempt to escape alive.

**Tunisia - 2018 - 2:35 - 5.1 - 113' - Arabic, French - Horror**

## Crew

**Director** / Abdelhamid Bouchnak

**Screenplay** / Abdelhamid Bouchnak

**Cinematography** / Hatem Nechi

**Editing** / Abdelhamid Bouchnak

**Music** / Rached Hmaoui, Samy Ben Said

**Sound** / Aimen Toumi

**Production Design** / Fatma Madani

**Costume Design** / Bassma Dhaouadi

**Cast** / Yasmine Dimassi (*Yasmine*), Aziz Jbali (*Walid*), Bilel Slatnia (*Bilel*), Hela Ayed (*Mongia*), Hedi Majri (*Saber*), Bahri Rahali (*Bechir*)

**Production** / Abdelhamid Bouchnak – Shkoon production

**Co-Production** / Omar Ben Ali – SVP production

**With the participation of /**

Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image





**In Conversation with**  
**Abdelhamid Bouchnak**

**What does the title DACHRA signify, and how did you get interested in such ghastly subjects?**

In Tunisian Arabic, *Dachra* is a word we use to designate a small, isolated village or a little hamlet.

Human nature has always been the subject I have gravitated towards, its good sides but especially its darker and more hidden ones. And for me, witchcraft is among the most twisted practices that humanity has ever managed to perfect, leading to such extremes as the disinterment of dead bodies or the decapitation of children. Over the past few years, throughout the North African countries, it's a phenomenon that we've seen re-emerge in our societies once again. The new practices that on first glance look like specific forms of "spirituality", but then can sometimes veer into unthinkable acts of cruelty and violence.

**The film is said to be based on true events. How were you exposed to these stories and testimonials or witchcraft?**

It may seem hard to believe, but the film's story is actually drawn from many true facts and actual events. Although witchcraft isn't something that's considered officially taboo, it's definitely a subject that most people avoid bringing up at the family dinner table. I would say part of the reason for that is because people are aware that something does actually exist. Something that we know about and maybe even believe in, but still we prefer not to talk about it. Just the fact of bringing it up is enough to charge the atmosphere - things start to get heavy and tense pretty quickly with these subjects.

Of course the stories that people tell aren't all true, there are more than a few urban legends, but in my experience most of them have a connection to reality and events that are documented and have really taken place. As a small child, I remember overhearing a discussion between my mother and my grandfather... They both thought I was fast asleep in the car... but luckily I heard everything they were saying.

The first story they told was about someone's uncle, who had gone off and slit his nephew's throat. The second story was about a woman who had gone to the cemetery, and together with her daughter, dug a body up out of its grave. The reason she wanted to exhume the body was so she could mix part of the corpse, I believe it was the hand, into her "couscous," and cast a spell on her beloved. Both mother and daughter were arrested and tried, and they came right out with all of these details in court. So just those two stories were already enough to mark me forever.

Then in 2012 another similar crime took place in Tunisia. A man massacred and then cut the throat of a 4 year-old little boy, trapping in a vice while draining out all his blood in an old barn. The little boy's aunt was

also involved in the crime as an accomplice and the official motive cited was a "treasure" that had been promised to them by a Shaman. But the only way to get to the treasure was to make an offering of "pure and noble blood", which had to come from someone like the little boy, so that the Djinn guarding the treasure could be satisfied and release it. These children are known as *Zouhri*, the lucky ones, and considered very special. The sorcerers believe that only the blood of such children is able to satisfy and appease the demons and evil spirits. You can recognize the Zouhri based on specific signs and physical marks like the ones we see in the film: a black stain in the eye or the horizontal life line on the palm of the hand, along with certain other distinctions.

Just recently in Tunisia, there was another news item about the death of a 4-year-old child that shocked public opinion. A gruesome and horrific slaying in which the little boy was stabbed over 40 times by his aunt and uncle. After the aunt and uncle were arrested, they testified that the boy Rabii had all of these 'signs.'

By now the number of children who have disappeared because of such situations is very worrying. Between witchcraft and organ trafficking I don't think these kids can be considered very 'lucky' after all. I've heard of such stories not just in Tunisia, they run through to Morocco and Algeria as well, and also other African countries. The more you learn the more you find that sorcery exists in some form throughout all cultures and all civilisations.





**How did the script start to evolve and come together from these stories? Did you know from the beginning you would have a female heroine?**

The idea for the film was really born with just three sentences that I wrote almost 8 years ago: "Mongia is a woman found in the middle of nowhere with her throat slit. For over 20 years she is kept in an insane asylum without anyone knowing who she is or where she came from. But very weird things seem to happen regularly in her presence..."

It all started from there and from the basic concept we gradually moved towards what became the final script. I wanted the film's heroine to be either Mongia or Yasmine. When I think about it, the horror films that made the biggest mark on me were the ones in which the main character is a woman: *The Blair Witch Project*, *REC*, *The Exorcist*... Then, bringing in the idea of the group of friends going into the forest together was a way to get the audience more directly involved in their adventure.

Cannibalism on the other hand was a notion that's a bit less present in everyday life in Tunisia, although it sometimes intersects with witchcraft as well. There are black magic rituals that make use of human body parts, taken from a dead body and cooked, in order to bewitch the other person who consumes them. I'm also a big Serial Killer aficionado, and the killers who intrigue me the most are the cannibals like Jeffrey Dahmer or Ed Kemper. In my mind the idea of cannibalism connects to the greatest fear any human being could have: the fear of being devoured by another human.

I've always wanted to explore the macabre side of humanity, but also our madness. I think there's a reason that psychiatric hospitals are frequently used as a setting for horror movies and I wanted to show some of that lunacy from our somewhat different perspective. In that sense you could say that the idea of the asylum and everything it represents was also one of my inspirations.

## **What does the character of Yasmine's grandfather represent, and what role does his religion play in the story?**

Yasmine's grandfather is religious, yes, though not much more or less than the average Tunisian his age. He represents an older, conservative generation attached to its culture but especially and even more to its beliefs. Yasmine's grandfather plays the role of protector, he loves her but he is also keeping a secret from her, forcing her to live without knowledge of the mystery he is hiding. At the end his connection to the monster Mongia is exposed, and begs the question: "Who is he really?".

But it's true I'm using the grandfather's character in a precise way. When he appears he's often reciting very specific Koranic verses, the verses we've been using ever since early childhood to chase away bad luck and evil spirits. Even when we took our school exams we recited them first. It's become a habit that has nothing more to do with the religious aspect, but is more of a cultural habit. Integrating the Koran and the ritualistic aspects into this kind of film introduces a combination that I think is all the more terrifying for

local Arab audiences, because they can also recognize their own lives and ways of doing in those verses. From early on in the film, starting with the ritual mortuary bath scene, I want the spectator to see something of themselves on screen, knowing that they'll one day end up in the same position as the dead man they are watching. The way people perceive these scenes will be quite different depending on what culture they approach them from.

## **In one specific scene in the film, where the professor assigns the journalism project to his students, the film seems to poke fun of the highly politicized nature of discourse in Tunisia. How do you relate to this and do you perceive any kind of political over-saturation?**

For me this was an obvious and important point. It's been over seven years now that in Tunisia life has been completely saturated by politics. Everything is political. Since January 2011, it feels like Tunisia has entered a new era in its history. An era where politics has taken

the upper hand on everything and everyone. There's no question this affects my perception of things more generally. Records or testimonials of the revolution are published and read by the thousands, and I'm not even mentioning all the films and documentaries. I understand this is normal after an event of such great consequence, but I also think it's important to remember that since then the world has kept on moving.

I want to move with it and not just look at it from a distance. So that's what the professor is trying to tell the students: to create, to innovate and to surprise. To do something 'exclusive' as he repeats to them. That was the spirit I brought to the film and what I'm trying to do with *Dachra*; telling the story of an 'exclusive subject' we wouldn't usually get to hear about. I hope it's a bet that pays off.





### **What were your some of your cinematic inspirations for DACHRA, and more specifically some of your favorite horror films ?**

In terms of the visual treatment for *Dachra*, Tarkovsky's *Stalker* was definitely a key reference. I wanted to disturb the viewer with a 'heavy' use of framing, light and movement, almost to over-saturate their senses. I tried to mix the more poetic inspiration that I find in films like *Stalker* or *The Return* by Andrei Zvyagintsev with a more straightforward 'American style' three act construction.

Some of my favorite horror films should sound very familiar: *The Exorcist*, *Cannibal Holocaust*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *The Orphanage*, *The Blair Witch Project*, *Paranormal Activity*, *REC* or *The Fly*.

### **How do you think horror and 'genre' films are perceived in Tunisia, in North Africa and in the wider Arab world?**

Attempts at the horror genre have been nearly non-existent in Tunisia, apart from one I can think of that was set in the world of spirits and haunted houses but was not widely seen. So you could say *Dachra* is one of the very first genre films to come out of Tunisia. And to be honest I really can't predict how audiences are going to react, having never come face to face with a movie like this from a country like ours. One thing that's certain though is that Tunisian audiences devour foreign horror movies, so I'm crossing my fingers that this is a good omen for *Dachra*. As far as what's been done in North Africa I know that Morocco has produced a few films and Egypt more than a few. But for the most part, these are remakes of American films.

### **You were involved in nearly every aspect of making Dachra - as its writer, director, editor and also producer. How did you juggle so many different roles?**

This was the hardest part of the experience for me, but it was the only way to make sure that the project ever

saw the light of day. I'm not going to go into details about the many problems and hassles I met with along the way, and today I've made my peace with them. Going into the project was a difficult choice, though in a way for me it didn't feel like a choice at all! Being the writer-director wasn't as hard as at the same time having the responsibilities of a producer. It's not about logistics or being able to do the work, but more a question of maintaining energy and concentration. I tried to delegate where I could to my line producer and my co-producer and I am deeply grateful to them both. And then editing! That was a whole new challenge. My greatest fear was being too complacent with my own images. It was maybe the hardest thing, but in the end I think I managed to detach myself sufficiently from the film to be able to cut it. I think every film is personal in the end, but with *Dachra*, I really had the fortune of being able to make all of the decisions. I know that in the future things might not always be this way, but at least this once in my life I'll have done it.



A black and white portrait of a man with a shaved head and a goatee, wearing a dark, double-breasted jacket. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is dark and out of focus, with some vertical lines suggesting an indoor setting.

# Abdelhamid Bouchnak

**Writer-Director, Editor & Producer**

Abdelhamid Bouchnak (1984) studied at the Ecole Supérieure de l'Audiovisuel et du Cinéma E.S.A.C. in Gammarth and graduated in 2008 with the short film *Miroir*. In the same year, he won the prize for Best Young Director at the International Film Festival in Carthage and moved to Montreal to complete a Master's degree in film studies. Since 2012, he has produced and directed video clips, web series and short films. *Dachra* is his first feature film.



## Yasmine Dimassi

Born in 1986 in Ariana, Tunisia, Yasmine studied at Carthage's Institut des Hautes Études Commerciales business school, graduating in 2010 with a degree in marketing and business intelligence. That same year, Yasmine gives in to her childhood aspirations and signs up for El Teatro Studio, the theatre workshop founded and directed by the legendary Tunisian dramaturge and actor Taoufik Jebali. Following the loss of her mother in 2015, Yasmine decides to devote her life entirely to acting and leaves behind her strategic planning job with TBWA Tunisia to follow her dreams. Since 2015, Yasmine has appeared in a number of Taoufik Jebali's theatre and contemporary dance pieces including "Malédiction", "Le Fou" and "30 ans déjà." In parallel, Yasmine has also developed a career as a voice actress, dubbing television series in the studios of the Nessma TV network. In 2017, Tunisian audiences named Yasmine the best voice artist in Tunisia for the complexity she brings to the characters she dubs. DACHRA by Abdelhamid Bouchnak is Yasmine Dimassi's first feature film.