



ZIYARA

A FILM BY SIMONE BITTON



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THE PARTY FILM SALES PRESENTS



ZIYARA

A FILM BY SIMONE BITTON

99' - France, Morocco, Belgium - 2020

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ב"ה

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In Morocco, Ziyara – the visit of the Saints – is a popular tradition shared by both Jews and Muslims. As part of a cinematic pilgrimage to her Jewish roots, director Simone Bitton embarks on a road trip across Morocco to meet with the muslim guardians of the country's jewish memory.



SYNOPSIS

Celebrated documentary filmmaker Simone Bitton (*Wall, Rachel*) returns with her most personal film to date. Inviting viewers on a cinematic pilgrimage to her homeland of Morocco, Bitton explores her Jewish roots through the sphere of the Muslim guardians of the nation's Jewish memory, centered around the tradition of "ziyara".

In the arid but beautiful landscape of rural Morocco, the country's youngest citizens have largely never themselves coexisted alongside Jews, although their presence is still felt in symbols, old shrines, synagogues and cemeteries. Many Muslims still maintain and find beauty in these commodities, seeing them as a timeless connection to the word of God.

Throughout the film, Bitton investigates the tradition of ziyara itself, a shared tradition between both Muslims and Jews. Pilgrims take a few days off in order to visit the tombs of saints, not only pray but more importantly to commune with nature, celebrate outdoors, meet new people and exchange ideas. The film is Bitton's opportunity to revisit her original identity through the eyes of maturity, rooted not in nostalgia, but in her willingness to tell the story of Jews and Muslims, as has been the consistent theme in her work for decades. And in revisiting Morocco and the "ziyara" tradition, Bitton finds a story of hope.

Bitton conducts intimate interviews not only with those old enough to remember sharing their land with Jews, but with a new generation of Morrocans inspired by their heritage. These deeply personal insights include everyday people and specialists, all of them modest and magnificent heroes in a relentless quest for modernity, dignity, and social justice.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I was born in Rabat, and was uprooted before my teens, taken away with my family in a mass exodus that brought an almost definitive end to the existence of my community of origin. Of the 300,000 Jews living in Morocco in the early fifties only a few thousand still remain – and that number grows smaller every year.

My early childhood was spent under the protection of the local Jewish saint, Rabbi Shalom Zaoui, who my parents “visited” on every important occasion, and who they never got over leaving behind. This visit to the saints, which we call “Ziyara”, was and still is a popular and firmly established tradition for both Jews and Muslims in Morocco. The saints are sages, scholars versed in the Torah or the Qur’an, Kabbalist or Sufi mystics, healers and miracle makers. To visit their tombs, you must generally hit the road and abandon any daily constraints for several days. Yes, you go there to pray or to implore, but more importantly to commune with nature, drink and celebrate outdoors, meet new people and exchange... the Ziyara is an invitation to a road movie!

Ten years ago, when I began staying in Morocco again on a regular basis to teach, I visited some of the most well-known Jewish shrines where I witnessed a kind of miracle: as I tried pitifully to communicate in French with the caretakers who were, for the most part, Muslims that pass this task down from generation to generation, the Moroccan dialect – darija – came back to me quite suddenly and without warning, when I thought I’d completely forgotten it. It was truly astounding. I didn’t film these moments as I was so busy experiencing them; but it was at that exact moment that my desire to film the “Ziyara” was born.

This film, in which I return to the place where I grew up to visit the

saints, synagogues, living spaces, and cemeteries of my ancestors, is therefore one about original identity as seen through the lens of maturity. Yet, as contradictory as it may seem, my approach is not nostalgic. In fact, ZIYARA is a continuation of my work.

For thirty years, I've been probing and telling the story of relations between Jews and Arabs - between Jews and Muslims. I've done this mostly in Palestine, where I've often filmed the worst. In Morocco, it was more about filming what was best and what has astonishingly endured after nearly disappearing too soon, as we say of a person that dies too young.

I wanted to translate the somewhat anachronistic human disposition known as fraternity into images, sounds, words and faces, an almost incongruous exception since the violence of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seems to have erased any hope of peaceful relations between Jews and Muslims around the world. A humble cemetery caretaker happy to locate the Jewish grave we came to find, a young curator that says, "Bismillah" while touching





a scroll of the Torah, a small, abandoned synagogue that's been transformed into a movie theatre showing Egyptian musicals... I wanted to incorporate these little things into a film that would offer what the Moroccan anthropologist Aomar Boum describes as “a story of hope in a world full of hatred, xenophobia, Islamophobia and antisemitism.”

By looking for the past, we always film the present. ZIYARA travels through time and space; but it's obviously the Morocco of today that appears in front of my camera: a Morocco emptied of its Jews for more than half a century, still traumatized by this loss, but whose share of Jewishness endures and still bursts forth at any moment. But for how much longer? I have no idea, but that's how it is for now – it's beautiful, and I thought it was rare enough to be noticed and filmed before it's too late. My film is not a scholarly book. It's neither “neutral” nor “objective”, and so much the better. But it has other strings on its bow to tell the past and shed light on the present. The characters in ZIYARA are not only witnesses of a bygone history. They are first and foremost themselves, today's Moroccans, modest and magnificent heroes in a relentless quest for constantly deferred modernity, dignity, and social justice. When their words weave the harshness of the present into the magnified memories of the past, it occurs to me that the film is a meditation on history in general, and the narrative that each of us creates for ourselves. In any case, that's the spirit in which it was made.

Simone Bitton, April 2020

BIOGRAPHY

Simone Bitton was born in Morocco in 1955. She pursued film studies in France, graduating from IDHEC in 1980. She has dual Franco-Moroccan nationality and lives between Rabat and Paris.

Simone has directed two feature-length documentaries distributed in movie theatres across France and in a dozen other countries: WALL, in 2004, and RACHEL, in 2009.

Previously, she made more than fifteen documentary films for television (see attached filmography). With styles ranging from archival montage to cinematic meditation by way of the personal quest or portrait of a writer or musician, her films reflect a human and professional commitment to better understanding current events, history, and the cultures of North Africa and the Middle East. Her commitment is also one of strict rigor, artistic ambition, and confident personal perspective.

Since 2014, she has worked as an associate professor in the film studies department of the University of Paris 8 (Vincennes-Saint-Denis). She regularly teaches courses and gives documentary workshops in various institutions in France and in Morocco.



FILMOGRAPHY

- 2008** Rachel - 95' - Produced by Cine-Sud Promotion
Berlinale Forum - Tribeca Film Festival New York - Cinema du Reel Paris - Hotdocs Toronto - Bafici Buenos Aires Sarajevo film Festival
- 2004** Wall - 95' - Produced by Cine-Sud Promotion
Director's Fortnight, Cannes 2004 - Sundance Film Festival 2005 (Jury's special Prize, World documentary competition) - Jerusalem International Film Festival (Spirit of Freedom Award for best Documentary)
- 2003** Ramallah Daily - Series 20 x 5' - collective directing -
Produced by Channel Four and Article Z.
- 2001** Ben Barka: the Moroccan Equation - 84' - Produced by Article Z, Arte and RTBF.
- 1998** The Bombing - 58' - Produced by CinéTévé, France 2, RTBF, Noga Communications
- 1997** Mahmoud Darwich: As the Land is the Language - 58'
Produced by Point du Jour and France 3.
- 1993** Palestine: Story of a Land - 110' - Produced by Point Du Jour, France 3 and INA.
- 1993** Daney/Sanbar: North-South Conversation - 47'
- 1990** Great Voices of Arabic Music - 180' & 3 x 55'

ויפוצו איביך וינוסו משנאיך מפניך



זוכר עולם בחיב
דעילוי נשמת הזקן
רודף צדקה וחסד
איש חיל ורב פנים
אוהב התורה ו
רבי עזר אלקי עזר כר
שנתב
ביום שלישי יב
ת
פרוכת
על ידי משפחת

מאגז

CREW

Written and Directed by **Simone BITTON**
Produced by **CINE SUD PROMOTION**
LA PROD
NOVAK PROD
Producers **Thierry LENOUVEL**
Lamia CHRAIBI
Olivier DUBOIS
1st Assistant Director **Merieme ADDOU**
Cinematographer **Jacques BOUQUIN**
Assistant Cinematographer **Soukaina BELGHITI**
Sound **Ghita ZOUITEN**
Production Manager **Leila AMRAN**
Postproduction coordinator **Pierre GRANGEREAU**
Editor **Dominique PARIS**
Assistant Editor **Sonia AHNOU**
Color Grading **Franck RAVEL**
Sound Editor **Frédéric FICHEFET**
Sound Effects **Philippe VAN LEER**
Sound Mixer **Emmanuel DE BOISSIEU**

