



*Raja* a film by Jacques Doillon



**France/Morocco, Running Time: 112 minutes**

Public Relations Contact  
Ann Hinshaw  
Film Movement Series  
375 West Broadway, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor  
New York, NY 10012  
212-941-7744, ext 214  
[ann@filmmovement.com](mailto:ann@filmmovement.com)

Distributor Contact  
Andre Lee  
Film Movement Series  
375 West Broadway, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor  
New York, NY 10012  
212-941-7744, ext 212  
[andre@filmmovement.com](mailto:andre@filmmovement.com)

## **SYNOPSIS**

Raja is an orphan. She has been through the worst. She doesn't believe that life can suddenly get better. If she's only going to get by, she'd prefer to earn an "honest" living.

Fred is a Westerner. Emotionally, he's a busted flush. When he meets her, replanting the grass in his garden, he takes an instant liking to her. He just wants to seduce her. "Sex and no commitment." It shouldn't be difficult. Raja senses that he only wants to have a little fun with her and that he'll drop her soon after. She's been there too often before. Yet there's something about him that makes her want to believe in him. Unwittingly, she has such an effect on him that he hires her to work in the house. But as she stubbornly refuses to give herself to him, Fred begins to think that she is taking him for a ride, that all she wants is a husband and a visa to make something of her life.

As neither speaks the other's language, the misunderstanding between them becomes ingrained. She is fired, revolts and goes back to the boyfriend she had been neglecting but who is at least able to share in her poverty.

Fred is desperate and loses himself in the fear of losing her while Raja can no longer bear not seeing him. He re-hires her and, in a moment of panic, comes up with the idea of her marrying her boyfriend, whom he hires as a driver, so as not to lose her. She feels definitively humiliated and convinces herself that she can expect nothing more from him.

Money, misunderstood feelings and quarrels play their part... For her, nothing has changed. For him, there is the certainty of having screwed everything up. And the possibility of suffering and, perhaps, of loving again.

## **CREW**

Screenplay and dialogue	Jacques Doillon
Director of Photography	Hélène Louvart
Sound	Brigitte Taillandier, Florent Lavallée
Assistant directors	Lola Doillon, Samia Charkioui
Film Editor	Gladys Joujou
Original score	Philippe Sarde (SiDoMusic publishing)
Costume Designer	Emma Bellocq
Stills Photographer	Alain Fillit
Producers	Margaret Menegoz for Les Films du losange Souâd Lamriki, Benedicte Bellocq for Agora Films
Distribution	Les Films du Losange

## **CAST**

Fred	Pascal Gregory
Raja	Najat Benssallem

Nadira	Ilham Abdelwahed
Youssef	Hassan Khissal
The cooks	Oum El Aid Ait Youss
	Zineb Ouchita
Fatiha	Fatiha Khoulaki
Ahmed	Ahmed Akensouss
The gardeners	Aïcha Arif
	Hajiba Firma
	Jmiaa Arif
Girls in the bar	Hanane Ben Jaddi
	Samra Ben Arafa
	Samira El Othmani
Raja's brother	Abdelilah Lamrani
Raja's sister	Rachida Boukhima
Raja's sister-in-law	Zineb Khoulaki
Girl from the Douar	Fatima Zorha

**ABOUT THE PRODUCTION**  
**(A conversation with Jacques Doillon)**

From writing to shooting the movie... What the actors give you cannot always be what you expected when you were writing the script (especially when most of the actors are "non-professional"). How do you plot your course between the consequences of chance encounter and pleasant surprises?

There are no stage directions in the script and I like to think that I am fairly detached from what I have written. When you read it, there is no indication as to how it should be spoken. It's like a musical score that can be performed and listened to in many different ways. I hear one kind of music, of course, when I write it but I am much more curious to know how the actors will perform it. Sometimes, they take it too far and I intervene but I enjoy working with them to find what is most fluid, what sounds most truthful, without trying to control everything in each scene. There are days when you want it to remain kind of tentative and others when it has to be more controlled. I try to be as free as possible. Before each scene, the further we go, the less I know. It all hangs in the balance. It has to be interpreted, performed...

The movie begins with a game, a childish bet and concludes with a despairing, wretched marriage...

I work to no guidelines. I have no structure in mind when I start to write. It all comes to me as I write, if I'm lucky! It's only when I've finished that I know what I've written. I exaggerate slightly. You can never write that freely. You obviously try to control what you're writing but it constantly escapes you and guides you at the same time. The characters reflect this, in fact. Fred thinks he can control what will happen with Raja and then the story escapes him, and his feelings likewise. Control is a delusion. There is always a part of us that escapes us. Fred's emotional armour-plating and his narcissistic, disillusioned, cavalier outlook haven't protected him, fortunately. Coming into contact with Raja, he becomes more open, more vulnerable and more alive. He is wrenched out of the comfort zone. Without that, and the return of emotion and feeling that accompanies it, the film had no overriding reason.

How can you put into words the strange affair between these two people? At the beginning, they seem so unlikely together and, indeed, you might ask if they do really come together at any point.

I wanted to show characters in the comedy of life, human beings quite simply with their qualities, their whims, their existential problems and their weaknesses. When the movie begins, Fred and Raja are both emotional invalids. Fred doesn't want to suffer. He prefers to have nothing, an emotional void, rather than suffer. Raja shares a life of poverty with Youssef. There is a real solidarity between them. They're in a kind of survival chamber. I don't know if you can describe their relationship as love. She has had a traumatic rape experience. The male influences on her life have all been negative. She dreams, half-heartedly, of meeting a handsome, kind, rich man who will fall in love with her. Being loved, having servants and soft skin... At the same time, with her inner violence, Raja is anything but a docile, obedient woman.

The heroes of your films are often young loners or orphans (Ponette, The Little Criminal, the young girl in Little Brothers and the one in La Drôlesse). Raja also seems very young...

Yes, Raja is like the big sister to The Little Criminal or La Drôlesse. They are characters who can be brave, driven, audacious and zealous when they want to be but who lack self-confidence. Raja is on the side of the absolute, which doesn't mean that she doesn't have her share of contradictions and inner prisons. Despite her justified wariness of men, she becomes committed to a love she didn't desire (she makes no attempt to seduce or "land" him when they meet) but which she finally gave into. She realizes that he is curious about her and it is almost certainly the first time that anyone has been curious about her, or even kindly or attentive. But at no point does she truly believe that he can be interested in her. She remains a prisoner of the conviction that he only wants to have a little fun and then ditch her. You mustn't forget that Raja is an orphan. She lost her mother's love too early. She was deprived of an image of herself where she might have felt loved by the only love that counts for any of us, boy or girl. As much as Fred's incapacities, her lack of self-confidence, her wariness and her reticence mean that their affair is doomed to failure. Their fear of love is huge... They both resist the idea of allowing love into their lives. At the end, this particular love is devastated but there is now room for others.

So this could be a film about fear? The fear that stops people loving and giving of themselves. A film whose message is -- paradoxically since its characters are unable to apply it -- "fear nothing"?

I think Fred has decided not to fall in love again. In emotional terms, he seems impotent. At the very least, he's not in a good way. The active gift of love, as they say, is perhaps something he was never capable of. He has already been in love, but does he know what love really is? He's caught up in twisted models in which the gift of love and the emotions of love are totally absent. And at the same time, this emotional solitude can never be enough for any person. She is devoid of emotion or life. If Raja immediately catches his eye it must be because, subconsciously, he knows that with her, it won't be like that. He says all he wants now is "just sex", a relationship that centres on pleasure and conquest. Of course, that is only

an illusion. It doesn't work like that but Fred probably thought that he would never fall in love with a Moroccan girl from the streets working in his garden. He wanted a playful relationship but it doesn't work out. Reality is too strong, too explosive. He can't control it.

Fred hires Raja as part of his household staff. It's a very 18<sup>th</sup> century solution...

I don't think Fred can be compared to that model. He proceeds by a series of clumsily improvised actions and gestures whose overall implication is that he is losing his grip on events and that he is scared of losing her, even though all his various possessive strategies would lead to the destruction of Raja. That makes him touching, and sometimes comic in the way everything slips through his grasp. When a relationship fails, it's always worthwhile trying to work out where your responsibility lies in the failure to achieve what you desired. In Fred's case, he's in love with Raja. He thinks he'd like to be with her but everything he does drives her away. Indeed, he is as cruel to himself as he is to her. He's almost certainly an unconscious masochist!

Yes, but at the same time, the movie is also full of whimsy... Fred tries anything and everything to get Raja, and nothing works. It's both extremely moving and funny.

The element of whimsy, or even comedy, in my films isn't as small as people would have you believe! I've never made a film that ratchets up the tension from beginning to end. I've always tried, with a couple of exceptions early in my career, to apply the elastic principle: you have to stretch it to its limit, then relax it a bit or it will snap in your hands. In some scenes, tension is necessary and, in order to come back to it later, you have to release the elastic and use the moment to catch your breath, smile or laugh with the characters so that the concentration and tension are just right to make the subsequent scenes work.

It's true that the two cooks are wonderful and even Fred has a whimsical side. He runs himself down with a lot of humour...

I'm often surprised by the various adjectives that seem to be used systematically in reference to my work. In the last few years, people have said my films are reminiscent of Marivaux and his sophisticated banter. Sometimes, that's not too far off the mark and, with the cooks, it's spot on. I wish I was such a sly analyst of emotions. Besides the whimsical aspect, there is gravity and the pain of love. To a certain extent, that's true of Fred, who can be cruel and full of pain but who expresses it in a trusting way and a light-hearted tone. It's not true of Raja, however. There's nothing sophisticated or bantering about her, although she can be amusing and childishly whimsical. She can also be very serious...

Money is at the heart of their relationship from the beginning. Fred hands it out at the drop of a hat. To the extent that even this becomes almost comical...

"Money" is the title of a Bresson movie but, if it hadn't been, my film could have been called that. Then again... "The Light of the World", the great title of a Christian Bobin movie, would have been more appropriate. Raja has something solar about her. She is the light of the world in this garden when all is dark in the heart of the man watching her. And he basks in her light.

He begins to come back to life. Money is, of course, a means of persuasion, a metaphor for possession but money is a pretext, a means of obtaining what you want, an invitation or a rejection when you don't know how else to act or what else to say. It's the opposite of "La Femme et le Pantin". She takes nothing from him, she doesn't humiliate him, she doesn't blackmail him. She gives herself to him in gratitude for his offer to hire her boyfriend. She pays her debt. She is compassionate. She is a "misérable" in the sense employed by Victor Hugo, anything but domineering. He is on the path to narcissistic self-destruction and if his tactics weren't so pathetically clumsy and obviously doomed to failure, they would be astonishingly perverse. Money changes hands but she doesn't want to sell herself and he doesn't want to buy her. He could easily do it but Fred doesn't put money on the table and demand that she sleep with him. At no point does he force her hand.

At the same time, he buys her by giving her a job...

Sure, but how could he be with her otherwise? When he fires her, he does so to stop suffering. If he doesn't see her again, he won't suffer. In fact, the more he pays, the less he wants to buy her and the more abandoned he is.

You have a reputation as a filmmaker who likes language and text. In this film, Raja and Fred don't speak the same language. He has no Arabic and she doesn't speak much French. Yet he talks to her a lot and, perhaps, more honestly than if they spoke the same language. She says very little. They also seem to understand each other sometimes...

At the same time, what traps them is the misunderstanding linked to the absence of words they share. It's hard enough to understand each other when you speak the same language... Words don't just describe the world, they help constitute it. These two people have nothing, or not enough, to constitute a world for themselves. Raja expresses herself a lot with her body. That's where her feelings are best seen: in her postures, her movements, her hands, her laughter... She has a wonderful laugh, a child's laugh. Raja's laugh is a laugh offered to the world that allows us to believe in our own innocence, which brings us back to our own childhood and the absolute irresponsibility and cost-free happiness that it sometimes had. It is only children who can laugh like that, with a lifetime of promise lighting up their face. Fred is no longer helpless, complicated, masochistic, likable or antipathetic, when he sees her and hears her laugh. He is happy.

Her laugh breaks and rolls over him. And he keeps something of it. He is not exactly the same as he was before. he is dazzled by her. That is universal. One person dazzling another and it's not all that common for a guy who has lost faith in everything except pleasure to rediscover a certain truth through love.

I wanted a woman who had purity, which is a frightening thing for a man. We could have followed a different path with these two, they would perhaps have truly come together, if he was a little less terrified of her purity, if he was able to trust her; and if she was less obstinate, less absolute. If they both had more trust, less difficulty in loving...

## **FILMOGRAPHY THE DIRECTOR**

**Jacques Doillon (Director)**

The Year 01, Touched in the Head, A Bag of Marbles, The Crying Woman, The Hussy, The Prodigal Daughter, l'arbre (tv), Monsieur Abel (tv), The Pirate, Family Life, The temptation of Isabelle, The Prude, Comedy!, The Lover, The 15 Year Old Girl, Pour un oui pour un non (tv), The Revenge of a Woman, The Little Gangster, Lover, Young Werther, A Man at Sea (tv), Germaine and Benjamin, Ponette, Too Much (Little) Love, Petits Frères, Totally Flaky, Raja

## **FILMOGRAPHY FOR CAST**

### **Pascal Gregory (Fred)**

No Time For Breakfast by Jean-Louis Bertucelli, The French Woman by Just Jaeckin, Flammes by Adolfo Arietas, The Brontë Sisters by André Téchiné, Chassé - Croisé by Arielle Dombasle, The Well-Made Marriage by Eric Rohmer, Pauline at the Beach by Eric Rohmer, Grenouille by Adolfo Arietas, Paradise Calling by Arielle Dombasle, Rupture by Raymond Carasco, La couleur du vent by Pierre Granier Deferre, Le temps et la chambre by Patrice Chéreau, The Thirst for Gold by Gérard Oury, The Tree, the Mayor and the Mediatheque by Eric Rohmer, Villa Mauresque by Patrick Mimouni, Queen Margot by Patrice Chéreau, Lucie Aubrac by Claude Berri, Those Who Love Me Can Take The Train by Patrice Chéreau, Zonzon by Laurent Bouhnik, Why Get Married The Day The World Ends by Harry Cleven, Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc by Luc Besson, Time Regained by Raoul Ruiz, Un ange by Miguel Courtois, Fidelity by Andrej Zulawski, Confusion of Genders by Ilan Duran Cohen, The Nest by Florent Siri, Ghost River by Olivier Dahan, Raja by Jacques Doillon.

### **Najat Benssallem (Raja)**

Raja marks Najat Benssallem's screen debut

## **ABOUT FILM MOVEMENT**

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- Eric Eason's *Manito*
- Scott Hamilton Kennedy's *OT: our town*
- Donovan Leitch & Rebecca Chaiklin's *The Party's Over*
- Tjebbo Penning's *Morlang*
- Mina Shum's *Long Life, Happiness and Prosperity*
- Vicente Amorim's *The Middle of the World*
- Jacques Doillon's *Raja*
- Tony McNamra's *The Rage in Placid Lake*
- Shola Lynch's *Chisholm '72- Unbought & Unbossed*
- Rolf de Heer's *Alexandra's Project*