

FILM REVIEW; Algeria's Incendiary Mix Of Poverty and Islam

By STEPHEN HOLDEN JUNE 14, 1995

Merzak Allouache's film "Bab el Oued City" presents an ominous, intensely atmospheric portrait of a working-class neighborhood in Algiers. It is a place where poverty, Islamic fundamentalism and the materialist mass culture beamed into people's homes via satellite fuel an incendiary mix of conflicting attitudes. At the center of the film, which opens today at the Joseph Papp Public Theater, is a scrawny young bakery assistant, Boualem (Hassan Abdou), who impulsively steals a loudspeaker that has been blaring fundamentalist polemics at night and keeping him awake.

The theft enrages Said (Mohammed Ourdache), a hotheaded young fundamentalist leader who patrols the area with his posse of hangers-on, and he determines to find and punish the culprit. The film, which was shot on location in Algiers, portrays Said and his sidekicks as neighborhood bullies who pump iron together in a gym and wield power through physical intimidation. The local Islamic imam (Ahmed Benaissa) disapproves of their tactics but is helpless to do anything. They are the new generation, and he is the old.

The message that Said hammers home again and again in his amplified harangues is the necessity for cleanliness. That means, among other things, that women should be sexually pure and keep their faces covered and their mouths shut. Boualem is involved with two women. One is an alcoholic older woman (Nadia Samir) to whom he supplies wine in exchange for sex and whom Said regards as a menace to society. The other, whom Boualem dreams of marrying, is Said's virginal younger sister, Yamina (Nadia Kaci), who is kept a virtual prisoner at home. The story is framed by letters written by both women to Boualem after he has left the country.

These conflicts are played out against a teeming urban canvas that shows a city sinking in corruption and duplicity as more and more of its inhabitants are either driven away by the rising tide of fundamentalism or give up hope and leave. Mabrouk (Mabrouk Ait Amara), Boualem's fellow assistant at the bakery, wears an American T-shirt emblazoned with the words "Power Play" and runs a thriving operation in goods stolen from ships anchored in the harbor. The neighborhood women, when unattended by their husbands, gather to consume television soap operas, which are forbidden.

Said himself is shown being manipulated by sinister and mysterious forces who may belong to organized crime or to a secret political group or both, and who supply him with a gun. Said's henchmen sneak off for sexual assignations in a local cemetery.

A symbolic figure who winds her way through the movie is a blind old woman who grew up in Algiers and now lives in France and has returned on a visit. As she is shepherded through the city by a relative, she inquires about the foul odor. And her guide lies, assuring her that the city is thriving and even cleaner than she remembers.

Filmed in 1993 on the streets of Algiers, which looks stunning despite its poverty and desperation, "Bab el Oued City" is an elegy for a city that has fallen on hard times.

BAB EL OUED CITY Written (in Arabic and French, with English subtitles) and directed by Merzak Allouache; director of photography, Jean-Jacques Mrejen; edited by Marie Colonna; music by Rachid Bahri, songs written and performed by Cheb Rabah; produced by Les Matins Films, Flash Back Audiovisuel, La Sept Cinema, Z.D.F. and Thelma Film AG; released by Jane Balfour Films. At the Papp Public Theater, 425 Lafayette Street, East Village. Running time: 90 minutes. This film is not rated. WITH: Nadia Kaci (Yamina), Mohammed Ourdache (Said), Hassan Abdou (Boualem), Mourad Khen (Rachid), Mabrouk Ait Amara (Mabrouk), Nadia Samir (Ouardya) and Ahmed Benaissa (Imam).