

Bab El-Oued City

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By [DEBORAH YOUNG](#)

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Pic, directed by Merzak Allouache, an Algerian living in Paris, is set in early 1993, not long after violent clashes brought death to the streets. It forcefully condemns the violence and secret political agenda of the fundamentalists while it separates them from other Islamic believers.

The story takes place in Bab El-Oued, a poor neighborhood of old Algiers. Fifteen loudspeakers perched on rooftops blare the hate propaganda of the rising fundamentalist group, which is lead by toughie Said (Mohamed Ourdache). One night, young baker Boualem (Hassan Abdou) can take it no more and rips out a loudspeaker, throwing it into the sea. His gesture sets off a search-and-destroy mission by Said and his black-leather-jacket gang.

Around this central thread, Allouache weaves a dense canvas of characters who represent various ways of thinking in Algeria. Boualem is courting Said's liberal sister, Yamina (Nadia Kaci), forced to wear a veil by her brother but inwardly straining against encroaching oppression.

Boualem visits a sad, rich woman living alone (Nadia Samir) who has taken to drink, and who becomes a target for the moralistic gang. An old baker detests Said's aggressiveness, but when pushed he fires Boualem without a thought.

There are boys attacked for listening to rai music (the home-grown rock) and families that furtively watch Western movies on their satellite-fed TV sets. There are youths who make their living selling contraband perfume and others who dream of Kim Basinger in "9 1/2 Weeks."

Allouache portrays the local imam as a liberal cleric, totally opposed to turning Islam to violent ends. When the going gets tough, he resigns his post as spiritual leader of Bab El-Oued, saying he doesn't recognize the neighborhood anymore.

There's a lot crammed into "Bab El-Oued City," and at times the many characters, each going in his or her own direction, overpower the narrative. For Western viewers, some details are almost subliminal, such as the origin of Said's group as mercenaries in Afghanistan, fighting "the Russian Commies."

Said's sinister backers, who appear from time to time in a big black car, are never labeled, though their intentions may be guessed as politically driven.

Overall, pic is a scary and accurate prediction of the rising violence that has, in the past year, swept Algerian society. Its fierce criticism makes it a film that probably would not be allowed to shoot in Algiers today.

Technical work is high quality, as is the work of the very natural cast. Abdou's perf as the brave baker who thinks for himself is worth singling out.

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French-Algerian-German-Swiss -- Drama -- Color

PRODUCTION: A Les Matins Films (France)/Flashback Audiovisuel (Algeria)/La Sept Cinema (France)/ZDF (Germany)/Thelma Film (Switzerland) co-production. Produced by Jacques Bidou, Jean-Pierre Gallepe. Executive producers, Bidou, Gallepe, Yacine Djadi. Directed, written by Merzak Allouache.

CREW: Camera (Kodak color), Jean-Jacques Mrejen; editor, Marie Colonna; music, Rachid Bahri; production manager, Tahar Haroura. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (Un Certain Regard), May 19, 1994. Running time: 93 min.

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