

Document Citation

Title	Ali zaoua
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Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	2000 Sep 18
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	40
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Ali Zaoua, Ayouch, Nabil, 2000

Variety
9/18-24/00
p. 40

ALI ZAOUA

(FRANCE-MOROCCO-BELGIUM)

A Playtime presentation in co-production with Remstar, in association with Alexis Films and Ali'N Prods. Produced by Nabil Ayouch, Martine Lambrechts.

Directed by Nabil Ayouch. Screenplay, Ayouch, Nathalie Saugeon. Camera (color, widescreen), Vincent Mathias, Renaat Lambrechts; editor, Jean-Robert Thomann; music, Krishna Levy; additional music, Keith Jarrett, Lili Boniche, Reinette L'O-rannaise. Reviewed at World Film Festival, Montreal (competing), Aug. 29, 2000. Running time: 95 MIN.

With: Maunim Kbab, Mustapha Hansali, Hicham Moussane, Abdelhak Zhayra, Said Taghmaoui.

By DENNIS HARVEY

Brute realism and wish fulfillment make earnest, if not entirely persuasive, bedfellows in "Ali Zaoua," French-Moroccan helmer Nabil Ayouch's second feature (after the 1997 "Mektoub"). Tale of three Casablanca street children struggling to give their late companion a fit burial, drama is sober and gritty, rendered at once palatable and incongruous by elegant widescreen presentation and fantasy overtones. Whether this can follow the similarly skewed "Central Station" to international success as an ultimately feel-good portrait of downscale lives for upscale auds is uncertain, though that's assuredly the goal.

Shooting on location, deploying actual street kids for most of his cast, Ayouch at first strikes a neo-realist tenor a la "The Bicycle Thief," "Los Olvidados" and "Pixote," depicting a "Lord of the Flies"-type culture of harsh justice and threadbare survival among preadolescent youths in Casablanca's bleaker districts. Ali (Abdelhak Zhayra) is de facto leader of a group who have abandoned older, Fagin-like Dib's (Said Taghmaoui) scavenging army at their own peril.

Ali insists he's about to adopt a sailor's life and leave this bombed-out, dockside-industrial landscape for an idyllic new life on "his island." This naturally strikes his pals as a pipe dream. Yet soon after a stone-throwing ambush from Dib's underlings leaves Ali with a presumably fatal head wound, he's sought by a crusty old salt who indeed had planned to take the unfortunate lad on as a cabin boy.

Afraid as yet to tell anyone they've stowed Ali's body in a watery compartment beneath a manhole, eldest Kouka (Maunim Kbab), glue-sniffing Omar (Mustapha Hansali) and squirrelly, pint-size Boubker (Hicham Moussane, a thesping natural) use their meager resources to plot his internment "like a prince." This is no easy task logistically and otherwise; the boys have quite enough to deal with already between finding (or stealing) food, locating shelter, eluding the unsympathetic police, and avoiding the wrath of Dib's malevolent legions.

Yet despite the credible, depressing depiction of the outcast margins they inhabit, scenario (by Ayouch

and Nathalie Saugeon) springs a happy ending.

While there are portents of this sentimental leap throughout, and inspirational intent seems more compassionate than manipulative, "Ali Zaoua" nonetheless falls short of full potential impact due to oil-and-water nature of its grittier and fairy-tale elements. Result is more formally admirable than deeply moving, despite Ayouch's nuanced direction and the precocious young thesp's unaffected turns. Adult pros are also fine, with Taghmaoui (from "La Haine," "Hideous Kinky" and "Three Kings") making a striking impression as the scarred, deaf-mute Dib, who doles out fatherly protection as well as cruel punishment to his charges.

Impressive widescreen lensing (featuring recurrent aerial sweeps across a pier length) and symphonic score add further high polish to a story that might have been more effectively packaged in less grandiose terms. Other tech and design aspects are similarly handsome, if glossy to a fault.