



The source

Director: Radu Mihaileanu
Country: Belgium/Italy/France
Date: 2011

*A review by Jordan Mintzer of **The Hollywood Reporter**.*

CANNES - Romanian-born filmmaker Radu Mihaileanu offers up another certifiably crowd-pleasing slice of world cinema in *The Source* (*La Source des Femmes*), a modern-day fable exploring female empowerment in the Arab world. Never one for subtlety, the writer-director tosses everything he can into this two-hour-plus humanist couscous, stirring in a mix of songs, sentiments and socio-religious questions set beneath breathtaking North African landscapes, and carried by a strong central performance from actress Leila Bekhti. Like his previous films, *The Source* boasts an Arthouse for Beginners appeal that could reach broad audiences beyond Europe.

A mixed reaction at the first Cannes press screening is telling of how Mihaileanu (*The Concert*, *Live and Become*) tends to split viewers, with some appreciating his heartwarming (and often tear-jerking) cross-cultural tales, and others wondering whether he deserves the auteur status of the Official Selection's usual suspects. Certainly, the fact that the script (co-written with collaborator Alain-Michel Blanc) deals with such a timely subject matter as women and Islam will make the film a talking point when EuropaCorp releases it in France this coming November. Still, despite what can be deemed a rather earnest call for females to rise up and (literally) take off the veil, there's an unwieldy, bordering-on-kitsch side to Mihaileanu's storytelling here, and the mix of colorful local customs and swelling, Middle East-influenced scoring (by Armand Amar, *Outside the Law*) tends to walk the line between a soap opera and an advertisement for Royal Air Morocco.

At its best when it concentrates on solid acting from a talented cast toplined by rising star Bekhti (*All that Glitters*), the film presents a universally simplistic parable set in an unnamed contemporary Maghreb village, whose women decide they no longer want to fetch water from a nearby well while their men sit around and watch. Given that Leila (Bekhti), Loubna (Hafsia Herzi) and the loud mouth, Mother Rifle (Biyouna), have very little persuasion over the macho, Koran-quoting males who control the remote enclave, they resort to the Power of the P, which in due course drives their husbands mad with sexual starvation.

As an outsider married to the town's sole intellectual, Sami (Israeli actor Saleh Bakri, *The Time that Remains*), Lelia suffers the wrath of an evil mother-in-law and other traditionalists who believe a wife's place is beside the hearth and nowhere else. When an old flame (Malek Akhmiss) pops up unannounced, he drives a wedge between Sami and Lelia that spills over into the greater struggle for the townswomen to have their way at all costs, leading up to a final, free-spirited battle pitting feminist yearnings against Muslim mores. Trying to hold this mixed bag together is not always easy, and rather than building a steady dramatic arc, Mihaileanu piles on a succession of scenes, some which delight through their humor and energy, others which disappoint through schmaltzy emotions and a tendency towards dialogue in which every character wears their heart on their djellaba. Thus, a subplot involving the illiterate Loubna's love for a local boy has the sophistication level of an after-school movie, while a few scenes where the women sing caustic songs (one to a group of ignorant tourists) provide an entertaining example of how they can wage war on their own terms.

Between the vivid, mountainous backdrop and array of radiant costumes, director of photography Glynn Speckaert (*In the Beginning*) has plenty of eye-candy to capture with his constantly roving camera, and

the attractive imagery helps some of the more cloying medicine go down easily. That, and the sheer vitality of all the players – including ever-amusing Algerian actress Biyouna (Viva Algeria) – manage to give Mihaileanu's vision a lure that rises above and beyond his more facile, and some would say naive, approach to an issue that one wishes could be solved so smoothly.

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Extracts from an interview with the director in the New York Times, May 2011:

"I've always had a passion for travel, and each film I've made has been a chance to discover another language and culture," said Mr. Mihaileanu, 53, a Jewish Romanian who lives in Paris. "Filming this story, close up, was a way of getting inside a whole world."

Mr. Mihaileanu noted that the release of his film coincides with the massive protests of the Arab Spring. "Revolution isn't just about the political movement on the streets," he said, "but how things are at home - and how customs and attitudes need to be shaken up. To have real social equality, democracy has to happen in the home. This is where it starts, and this was my pleasure making the film - getting inside another world." Leila, the bride who may be sterile, risks becoming an outcast and being replaced; another woman is beaten by her husband in earshot of the entire family, punished for her disobedience. The director said he wrote the part of Leila for Ms. Bekhti, his heroine. In describing the role to her, he said: "I told her, 'You are a contemporary Joan of Arc; you set off a revolutionary movement, about love and women's place in the world.'"

But "The Source" is also a choral movie of women's voices, shot in Arabic in a small hamlet with a handheld camera. "All my characters are important," Mr. Mihaileanu said. "When I write, I write them all in. Then I have to shorten and focus." Hafsia Herzi, a French actress, plays young Esmeralda, a romantic who suffers from the strike. The Palestinian actress Hiam Abbass plays Leila's mother-in-law, a bitter woman who wears her own scars in secret. "She's a magnificent actress," Mr. Mihaileanu said. "I let her choose her part, and she wanted to play an unsympathetic character for a change."

He said he felt a great sense of liberty directing the movie, even though it was filmed in Darija, a Moroccan dialect that he does not master. "I love the melodious sound of it," he continued, "and so much happens through music and dance. I made 'Live and Become' with characters who spoke Amharic and Hebrew, and in 'The Concert' the musicians speak Russian." "I don't speak Arabic, but I don't speak Russian or Hebrew either, and that didn't keep me from making my two earlier films." He added: "Ever since I escaped from Ceausescu's Romania, it has been my pleasure to do just what I choose. And this story is important to me. It's about aridity, arid hearts, and finding the link to get the flow."

Mr. Mihaileanu, who started out acting in a Yiddish theater in Bucharest, left Romania at 22 when he went to Israel for a few weeks. He had a supportive family: His father was a journalist, his mother an editor. "My father was in love with French literature," he said, "a cultural editor. My mother published children's books and gave us a love of stories and legends. All their friends were poets and painters, big talkers and big travelers. Even though they couldn't travel."

He moved on to Paris in 1980, where he graduated from the film academy IDHEC, and worked first on Volker Schlöndorff's "Swann in Love," then as an assistant to the director Marco Ferreri in the 1980s. "Ferreri said it first: 'Le futur est femme.' Woman is the future of man. He made a movie with that title and I thought of him when I started on 'The Source'" he said.

Before filming this movie, Mr. Mihaileanu moved into a small hamlet outside Marrakesh and started to interview women in the valley. "It took me three months to prepare, from July to September 2009, and three months to shoot. The village had just gotten water themselves piped in only four years ago, so they got the drift of the story." It was during the interviews that "I met some of these characters and cast them in the movie," he said. "They are beautiful and I feel like saying, listen to these women, look at their beauty. They are luminous."