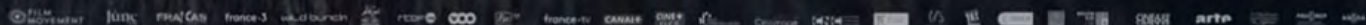


-FATHER SON HOLY GORE



ANIMALE

A FILM BY EMMA BENESTAN

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CANNES FILM FESTIVAL 2024 - SEMAINE DE LA CRITIQUE

ANIMALE

a film by Emma Benestan

**starring Oulaya Amamra, Damien Rebattel, Vivien Rodriguez, Claude Chaballier,
Eliès-Morgan Admi-Bensellam, Pierre Roux, Marinette Rafai, Renaud Vinuesa**



**2024 | 98 Minutes | France, Belgium, Saudi Arabia
French with English Subtitles | Horror, Thriller | Not Rated**

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SYNOPSIS

In the Camargue region of the South of France, there remains an infamous, long-standing tradition of bullfighting. Local youths participate in the elegant yet dangerous challenge, practicing a modernized version of the sport that seeks not to kill the animals but rather to showcase agility and dominance. Among them is Nejma, an intrepid twenty-two-year-old with dreams of one day winning the annual competition. The only woman working on the cattle ranch, she trains tirelessly to prove herself equal among the men, both in and outside of the arena. The ranchers share a deep respect for the bulls, though when a loose bull threatens the community of riders and young men begin turning up dead, a hunt to find and kill the creature begins. Nejma fears for the bull, beginning a dark, mysterious transformation of her own.

The sophomore feature of French filmmaker Emma Benestan, *ANIMALE* is “a brutal disorienting horror fable burning with feminine anger,” (*AWFJ.org*), and a thrilling entry into the body-horror subgenre.

ABOUT THE FILM

Emma Benestan’s second feature film as writer/director is set amid the raw excitement and risk of the *course camarguaise*, a form of bull running unique to the Southern French region where Benestan was raised. Framed as a race rather than a rout, the *camarguaise* is a context of speed, agility and bravery that does not result in the death of the bull. Benestan’s thrilling, confronting and boldly cross-genre film places a rare female competitor, the quietly determined twenty-two-year-old Nejma (Oulaya Amamra), in the centre of this hazardous and heavily male-dominated environment. Is Nejma safe? Should she have to be? These questions take on darker hues when Nejma’s socialising with her male counterparts takes a darker turn. Meanwhile, the very countryside grows increasingly menacing, with rumours of a wild bull goring young men to death.

But for all its genre elements, *ANIMALE* is also a deeply felt and subtly played story of community, betrayal, rebellion, denial and self-acceptance, anchored by naturalistic performances and a deep sense of place. Benestan here shows herself to be a director of prodigious ambition and skill, as adept at shooting nail-biting arena action as she is at depicting human intimacy. Her partnership with Amamra, meanwhile, is one of electrifying trust and creative symbiosis.

But this is also a film of great tenderness, both in its portrayal of the mysterious communication possible between humans and animals, and in its sympathy for the beasts we all have within.

WRITER/DIRECTOR EMMA BENESTAN

This is your second feature film as writer/director, after *Hard Shell, Soft Shell* (2021). Could you explain a little about your background and your entry into filmmaking?

My film background is film editing: I worked many years with Abdellatif Kechiche, on *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (2013) and *Mektoub, my love* (2017). What I like to do is to completely overturn the expected codes of genre. My debut feature was a romantic comedy, exploring male sensibility in what is expected to be a feminine context. In *Animale*, I placed a woman protagonist in a male environment, in a genre typically more associated with masculinity - the Western. That's very important to me: I like subverting genres, and telling stories that are anchored in a diverse context.

I had already made a documentary (*Fearless Girl*, 2019) about Marie Segrétier, who was the only woman who participated in bull running. In my work with Marie, I asked myself a lot about her place in the arena, and the toxic masculinity around her. I wanted to show the power and the strength that she has - and to show her violence as a form of rebellion against the domination that she's faced her whole life, and against the iconography of injured and weak female bodies. At the time, I was working also on a genre series, and rewatching all the episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* - my teenage passion!

You shot in the Southern French coastal region the Camargue, which is where you were raised yourself. The *course camarguaise*, the form of bull running seen in the film, originates from there and is practised in many villages. Was it part of your upbringing?

Yes, it's the environment that I grew up in; my parents lived forty minutes away from the area that's portrayed in the film. And I remember when I was younger, I used to go and see the bulls in the arena, in different villages. It's a very gender-oriented environment, ruled almost entirely by men. But in contrast to the *corrida* [the more internationally recognised form of Spanish bullfighting, with matadors], this tradition doesn't involve killing of the animal. It's very, very different in that aspect. It's also very popular amongst immigrants, because it can lead to social advancement. It's like football: you can enter it at the local level, earn your own status, and ultimately you can make a lot of money. It's a microcosm that can tell you a lot about French society, and that's very important to me. I was always fascinated by the bulls, by their savagery.

The Camargue is mythological and fantastic, as well as being linked to my own adolescence. It's a territory that's very close to me and that I wanted to explore. In the Camargue, it's often said that there are more animals than people! It's the animal kingdom that dominates.

The bulls also lead me on the path of the legend of the Minotaur. I started to imagine reversing the myth: what if the Minotaur was a woman? Then the story might tell us something completely different about violence. I'm deeply in love with the world of bulls, and have a lot of respect for that specific region and tradition. It turns a mirror on all the complexities in our society, about men and women, about gender and genre. Is the Minotaur only a monster? Why does it specifically attack men?

Working through mythology and genre cinema allowed me to build my story and open up the field of the intimate and the political. I wanted to make a film about a young girl who, not without pain, comes to understand things about violence and the world. And I had no desire to sexualize Nejma's body, which is a body in pain. In the film, metamorphosis isn't just a place of power; it costs Nejma something, it takes something away from her.

When I started casting, with my casting director Cendrine Lapuyade, we were told that Nejma didn't exist - that she was a figment of my imagination, that no woman could go into the arena the way she does. The character was disturbing, it was because she was approaching a reality that people didn't want to see. But by bringing Nejma into the arena through the power of fiction, we opened up a powerful social breach that allowed other ideas to take shape. I wanted to question the price she has to pay to acquire this power and strength.

ANIMALE is a fascinating mixture of genre elements – it's naturalistic in style, but carries a deep charge of myth and fantasy; it has elements of the Western, body horror and feminist revenge drama. I was reminded of the great monster transformations in *The Howling* (1981) and *American Werewolf in London* (1981), but also of the fervent media debate that surrounded the release of *The Accused* (1988), in which Jodie Foster's character is raped and then accused of putting herself in harm's way through her risk-taking and independence...

It's natural to some extent to label films, to put them into different boxes. But for me as a filmmaker - the film you're making is always many different things. I didn't set out in my mind to make a revenge film. It's as much an ode to a place that I love. The premise of the film is a place I love; and my deep wish is to create a new metaphor of violence against women.

I love hybrid forms. When you are in Camargue, you just feel the magic and the fantasy, the imaginative nature of that land. It's everywhere; you actually live and breathe it. But I'm also nourished by all the horror films I've watched since I was a teenager, and by my father's favourite Westerns, by Anthony Mann and John Ford. Those had a profound impact on my imagination - I wanted to make a Western the way my father liked them! There were also Camargue Westerns, B movies, from the 1960's-70's, which I rediscovered while working on the film.

It was a true challenge, with my DOP Ruben Impens, to realise this hybridity, the visual approach of the film and its mise-en-scene. It's very difficult to mix all these elements whilst also being true to a natural environment, and to the wild animals that you cannot completely master or control. But Ruben is more than a cinematographer - he was a true collaborator in the staging, because he's always questioning the character and what she is experiencing, by playing with sound, image, and angles. We worked on these sensory dimensions to convey Nejma's inner world going out of control. This was also the direction for the music, with our composer Yan Wagner. My main reference was John Carpenter, and also the soundtrack to *Near Dark*. Music helps make the transition from reality to fantasy.

In terms of your reference to *The Accused*, I read a very interesting book called *Self-defence: A Philosophy of Violence*, by Elsa Dorlin* - it opened up my mind, because it explains how much we are inclined to think about women's bodies as injured bodies, as traumatised bodies. But women's bodies can be very powerful; and they can also be violent, and that can be a way of subverting the power dynamic that is at play most of the time. It's disruptive, a woman in that situation; it's disturbing.

For me, genre is strongest when it's intimate and political. During the preparation phase, Ruben and I talked a lot about David Robert Mitchell's *It Follows* (2014), Jacques Tourneur's *Cat People* (1942) and Kathryn Bigelow's *Near Dark* (1987). The female characters in these films are very strong, with a relationship to the monstrous, to the bodily unease in the body that I feel is essential to show and tell through editing. We had to frame in a way that allowed us to get very close to Nejma and her sensations, her vertigo. We wanted the viewer to feel the violence of the trauma in her own flesh. My focus was to get under her skin with a feeling of heightened senses, rather than playing on jump scares. For the transformation, we played with the full moonlight, the shadows - the beast's hunt which becomes the woman's hunt. Gradually moving out of reality, to question its raw violence, and find the beauty of resilience, without forgetting the heroine's suffering.

How do your own cultural background and the backgrounds of the characters in ANIMALE relate to the political context in France?

Identity has multiple facets in France. French society is made up of different waves of immigration, from very different countries. I come from a very diverse background myself, having a French mother and an Algerian father. Representation of that mixed identity on the big screen is still uncommon. We see that our main protagonist is originally from Maghreb. But I didn't want the film to be predominantly about race. I just use our power of representation to incarnate a type of character - who we usually see as a white male - into Nejma. It is a way to open one's imagination and fantasy.

To depict this unique sport on film must have been an extreme physical and logistical challenge. How difficult was it to take that on, and to convince this community of people that they could trust you?

It was more than one challenge! Because when you work on a movie with wild animals, you can't control exactly what's going to happen. I had already shot two documentaries in the region of the Camargue, so my thinking was: we're making narrative fiction, but the approach needs to be anchored in realism. You have to take an observer's position on nature, and accept everything that it gives you. Of course, we were guided by a wrangler - a local farmer that knows how to deal with the wild animals. They are called *manadiers* in French, and he guided us. We picked the most kind-natured bull for the shoot... but none of that protected us from unexpected events!

It was very important to me to shoot in specific weather conditions, and at specific times of day and night. Moonlight was particularly important. Nature had to lead, because I wanted to make a film that shows how much nature and the animal kingdom can teach us about our present time - about our own living habits, how we could and should adapt more.

I took special pride in working with non-professional actors, which was another challenge. Because it's such a complex and particular setting, I felt that using professional actors would have betrayed that environment and not given that culture justice. I needed people that live and breathe with the bulls every day: get up with them, eat with them, spend their down time with them. Bull running is their passion; they've lost friends in the races. It's in their blood. So that was a fundamental principle of the film. It was a very complicated and intense casting process, which took over six months. People called me crazy - "you can't do this, it's too dangerous! There are no women in the arenas. What are you doing?"

So some attitudes were quite tough in the beginning. But by the end they were asking, "What's your next project, when can we work with you again?"

It was a hell of a ride. A huge adventure on a cinematic, human and nature level.

Was it hard to convince producers and funders, given the complexity of the undertaking?

I had no problem convincing my two producers - we had been discussing the project for years before I started writing, because one of them had seen and loved the two documentaries I made there. The Region Sud and Region Occitanie were our first supporters. Then France 3 Cinema, Canal Plus and Film Constellation joined. And Audrey Diwan's committee at Avance sur Recettes gave us the CNC grant.

Genre films are tough to finance in France, so we were one of the lucky ones. We shot over thirty days and we put a lot of care into special effects, visual effects and animals. We always had to find ways and adapt to them. But constraints can be creative! And my previous knowledge of the culture and the region helped I guess.

You needed a very special actress to embody Nejma. Did you always want Oulaya Amamra to play this role?

We've known each other for twelve years, and this is the third film that we've made together. I wrote this role for her. I knew that she was the only one able to play this character. We have a very deep connection and friendship. Oulaya has an inner world of her own, to which I'm very sensitive. Without her, Nejma wouldn't have been so "real". Oulaya's involvement in this role, and in the film as a whole, was crucial for me. She has the ability to work on characters in a very sort of intense way, similar to Method acting, which is not so common in France - you don't find a lot of actors here who will approach a role like that, with so much preparation. She was already a well-trained horseback rider because of a film she had shot that year, but she had so much more to learn to become Nejma - and she came through. She worked on the role physically for a long time - three or four months - and

she spent a lot of time with the farm workers on site. And she kept on questioning herself, which we also did together - talking about violence, and rape, and denial, and women's own body agency. We grew up together! And of course, these are also questions that we tackle every day as women ourselves: what does it mean to be a woman in a male-dominated world?

It has always been a complicated question for feminism, whether male violence is inevitable, or can be eradicated. Can women ever be free of it - or should we always be protected from it?

Yes, that's a big question. I think the two things can go together. I like to think in terms of a collective future, where we have protective families that even include the natural world, animals. I don't think we have to be one against the other, but one *with* the other, being mutually vigilant in order to avoid power becoming the perverted tool that we know it can. Power, whether it's in the hands of a man or a woman, can be a tool of perversion. So we have to say no to it, to rebel against it, but not become tyrants ourselves. We have to live with our own strength, and not exert it against others. It's a challenge where sisterhood can be a great tool and I've relied on this tool myself a lot, with my fellow female directors, with my very female crew and my female producers for instance. I also think having positive male characters in the film, like Tony who have protective attitudes, who show it's possible to resist. This character was key - he helped me to avoid falling into binary representations of feminine versus masculine. It's more complex than that. I wanted to question our relationship with violence in the broadest sense - whether we're a woman, a man or a beast. When I started writing the character of Nejma, I asked myself a lot of questions about Nejma's self-perception. She's not into seduction, but she's feminine; she's a funny girl, with a good repartee... She wants to be the equal of the boys in the locker room, but she's automatically sent back to her gender.

OULAYA AMAMRA (NEJMA)

How did you begin working on this project with Emma?

This is the third time I've worked with Emma, and we're close friends in real life. She's a person I love, and a filmmaker I deeply admire, because she creates character types that have never existed before. And I love to play roles that are new on screen. She has taken on the responsibility as a writer and as a director of opening the doors for people whose stories we don't normally see, and that's something that I deeply admire. Her first feature film was a romantic comedy, but the protagonist was a man; even that's pretty unusual! And to have a character like Nejma, in a male-dominated world? It's not what you expect. You too often see a girl like Nejma in a social realist, kitchen sink-type film. But thanks to Emma, she gets to exist in a supernatural horror/Western set in Carmague...! I was immediately fascinated by the character, and by the story. I'd work with Emma for the rest of my life if I could.

What were your feelings about working with the bulls? Were you frightened?

Of course! I had never seen a bull before in my life. The first time I watched the race, I was very scared, just because they're so huge. They're massive! But I was mesmerised - I was fascinated by the animals. They were extraordinary partners, in a way, to the humans. And there were so many magical moments working with them - like the scene where I feed them from a truck. We had already rehearsed the scene, but the magic was that there was this heavy fog the day we shot it, and the atmosphere was just incredible. The bull seemed not to walk or run to us but to fly. And when I watched them, I often felt that our souls were connected. That was the impression I had in the second scene in the arena, when I'm standing in front of them. I realised what it means when we say that animals give us back what we give them first. I really did feel, deep down inside, a sensitivity coming from this wild animal. And that's a parallel with my character, of course. Nejma seems very sensitive, very delicate, but gradually, she reveals herself as a very powerful woman. The bulls are

very powerful animals, but they can show fragility in the race that shows us that deep down in their souls, they are sensitive beings.

You did a lot of preparation for the role – what did this involve?

I spent a few months in the Camargue before starting shooting - I wanted to immerse myself in the land, the nature, the animals. You come across bulls, horses, pink flamingos... and you're prey to insects, especially mosquitoes! It's man who cohabits with beasts, not the other way round. We shot at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer and in Occitanie, so we were right in the heart of France, yet I felt like I was in Texas! It was a real change of scenery. And I went to a lot of bull races with Emma, to observe, understand and feel. It's fascinating to see a bull move.

We worked a lot with the animals, and on the physicality, in preparation and in rehearsal. There were some technical gestures that were important for me to learn, so that they would look real, and I was helped by the non-professional actors who knew about all of that and who initiated me. We bonded right away. But the relationship with the technical team was also very strong and very gentle. Everyone was involved in every aspect of the film. It wasn't an easy shoot - the weather, the animals - but in human terms, you can count shoots like this on the fingers of one hand.

As for the transformation scenes, I think we all have that kind of power in ourselves, that strength and rage and violence that she finds. I was also just guided by the bulls - by watching them, and also by listening to them – their breathing, their cries – all the sounds of the animals that our sound engineer was recording. I was really inhabited by them - I was guided by them. Whenever we shot the scenes of bodily transformation, I asked to be able to listen to those sounds, because they were so powerful in guiding me, and in helping me to delve down and find those emotions that we all have.

Is it hard to re-emerge from such a place once you've got there?

No, it wasn't hard to leave Nejma behind. On the contrary, I think she actually helped me a lot, in accepting the power and violence that I have in me and channelling it into strength.

How close do you feel to Nejma and her situation?

I think I share many things with Nejma – both the fragility, and the feeling of power and strength. I share her views and her attitude. There's a sort of denied power that I feel in myself, and a rage - but also the fragility; the need to fight to be able to exist in this world. In the environment of cinema, that is something that I share: the fight to be able to find my own place, as a woman, and as a racialised woman, from a Moroccan and Algerian background. Nejma fights in the arena, I fight to exist. Nejma exists now because of Emma and this film - and I also exist because of Emma and this film. So I hope there will be many more Nejmas in the future! It's so important to have created this character who will hopefully inspire all the young Nejmas out there who have trouble believing in themselves, because they are rarely portrayed as being successful in all-masculine environments, like the world of bull racing. I hope that this film will allow so many more women and girls not just to admire and enjoy the mix of genres, but to finally see protagonists within those genres that they can identify with themselves. Emma brings grace to those who have always been relegated to second place.

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BIOS

Writer, Director - Emma Benestan

Emma is an award winning franco-algerian director born in the south of France, who has always been passionate about bull races. Following her critically acclaimed romance *Fragile* shown in over 70 festivals around the world, *Animale* is her first genre film.

Producer - June Films

June is a Paris-based production company founded by Julie Billy and Naomi Denamur in 2020. By combining their complementary expertise of the market and production skills, June brings together an international family of filmmakers and fosters the emergence of new talent. June's productions include *Animale* by Emma Benestan, selected at Cannes Critics' Week and a limited series for HBO Max, *Black Lies*, directed by Just Philippot. Upcoming film *The Last One* by Hafsia Herzi is currently shooting.

Actress - Oulaya Amamra (Nejma)

Oulaya Amamra and Emma Benestan met in 2016 on the short film *Belle Gueule*, which won her the Best Actress prize at the Festival Premiers Plans Festival in Angers.

She went on to win the César for Best Actress in 2017 for her role in Houda Benyamina's *Divines* (Cannes Caméra d'Or). She entered the Conservatoire d'Art Dramatique of Paris the same year.

She went on to work with filmmakers André Téchiné, Marie-Castille Mention-Schaar, Philippe Garrel, Quentin Dupieux, Mohammed Hamidi and Marie Monge and Vladimir de Fontenay.

In 2021, she starred in Emma Benestan's debut feature, *Fragile*.

CAST

OULAYA AMAMRA : Nejma

DAMIEN REBATTEL : Tony

VIVIEN RODRIGUEZ : Kylian

CLAUDE CHABALLIER : Léonard

ELIES-MORGAN ADAMI-BENSELLAM : Jordan

PIERRE ROUX : Arthur

MARINETTE RAFAI : Ouarda

RENAUD VINUESA : Renaud

CREDITS

A film by EMMA BENESTAN.

With OULAYA AMAMRA, DAMIEN REBATTEL, VIVIEN RODRIGUEZ, CLAUDE CHABALLIER, ELIES-MORGAN ADAMI-BENSELLAM, PIERRE ROUX, MARINETTE RAFAI, RENAUD VINUESA.

Image - RUBEN IMPENS, SBC

Casting - CENDRINE LAPUYADE

Original music - YAN WAGNER

Script continuity - DONATIENNE DE GOROSTARZU

Costume - FABIENNE MENGUY

Make up - STÉPHANIE CARON

SFX - OLIVIER AFONSO & MARINE DESPIEGELAERE

Production Design - ÈVE MARTIN

Editing - CLÉMENCE DIARD

Sound -ANNE DUPOUY, GERT JANSSEN, AIDA MERGHOU, EMMANUEL DE BOISSIEU

Postproduction - LIZETTE NAGY PATIÑO

Unit production management - JÉRÔME BRIAND & YUKI KURODA

Line production - GAËTANE JOSSE & CHRISTOPHE HOLLEBEKE

Producers - JULIE BILLY, NAOMI DENAMUR

Co-producers - CASSANDRE WARNAUTS, JEAN-YVES ROUBIN

A JUNE FILMS production, in co-production with FRAKAS PRODUCTIONS, FRANCE 3 CINÉMA, WILD BUNCH, RED SEA FUND, RTBF (BELGIAN TELEVISION), VOO and BE TV, with the participation of FRANCE TÉLÉVISIONS, with the support of CANAL+, with the participation of CINÉ+, in association with FILM CONSTELLATION and CINÉMA 18, with the support of the CENTRE NATIONAL DU CINÉMA ET DE L'IMAGE ANIMÉE, FONDS IMAGES DE LA DIVERSITÉ, AGENCE NATIONALE DE LA COHÉSION DES TERRITOIRES, of the CENTRE DU CINÉMA ET DE L'AUDIOVISUEL DE LA FÉDÉRATION WALLONIE-BRUXELLES, of the TAX SHELTER DU GOUVERNEMENT FÉDÉRAL DE BELGIQUE AND D'INVER TAX SHELTER, of the RÉGION OCCITANIE, of the RÉGION PROVENCE-ALPES-CÔTE D'AZUR, in partnership with the CNC, with the participation of CINÉAXE DÉVELOPPEMENT, CINÉMA 16 DÉVELOPPEMENT, ARTE/COFINOVA 19, the PROCIREP - ANGOA

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