

QUINZAINÉ  
DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT  
CANNES 2021

THE PARTY FILM SALES AND ANDOLFI, IN ASSOCIATION WITH BEACHSIDE PRESENT

A FILM BY ELY DAGHER

البحر أمامكم

# THE SEA AHEAD

MANAL ISSA RABIH EL ZAHER YARA ABOU HAIDAR ROGER AZAR

## SYNOPSIS

After a long time gone, Jana, a young woman, suddenly returns to Beirut. She finds herself reconnecting with the familiar yet strange life she had once left.







**Ely Dagher, *The Sea Ahead***

(Lebanon, 2021, selected for Director's Fortnight, Cannes 2021)

*Interviewed by Philippe Azoury*

**You broke onto the international film scene with *Waves 98*, a first short film, in 2015, which won the Palm d'Or at Cannes. But what was your journey leading up to the film and the award?**

I finished high school in 2002/2003, at a time when the film industry in Lebanon offered few prospects for someone wanting to get into film. It mostly involved working in music videos and advertising. I did an internship on a music video, and knew that wasn't what interested me. After studying fine arts, I got another degree in animation, but that wasn't a passion either at least not the technical aspect. So, I decided to go to an art school in London where I did a thesis focusing on the correlation between history, memory, and the archive in the construction of identity. That led me to do more in-depth research on Lebanon. I did a semi-fictional installation about the Holiday Inn hotel, a landmark in what was referred to as the "battle of the hotels" during the Civil War. That hotel in ruins was supposed to be destroyed in 2008. However, it's one of the few remaining yet disappearing traces of a civil war whose battles lasted from 1975 to 1990, and for which there are still no written history nor official monuments to commemorate it. I did a project where I met fighters who fought in the Holiday Inn and mixed in elements of fiction to the point that the line between what was fictional and what was reel is blurred. That research helped me understand the themes that interested me and how I wanted to explore them going forward.

Those themes, that research, that conception of the fragile memory, and the mixing of document and fiction have somehow fed my two films, *Waves 98* and *The Sea Ahead*.

***The Sea Ahead* is yet a major film about Lebanon in that it describes the mental state of the Lebanese, who've withstood the forces of history for several decades...**

I hope so. I really wanted the film to reflect the country, its inhabitants, and the textures of Beirut. I wasn't trying to create empathy for the character through a supposed drama. It's more a set of signs where everything contributes to pushing her into a particular state.

### Manal Issa ties us to Jana...

I first discovered her in 2016 in her first film role: *Parisienne* (original title: *Peur de rien*), by Danielle Arbid. I already had an initial treatment for what would become *The Sea Ahead*, and upon seeing Danielle's film, I was struck by the strength of her performance and her determination. I met Manal in Beirut two months later and was convinced of the potential strength of an encounter between my script and who she is. She didn't exactly correspond to the Jana I'd written but, on the other hand, I saw the incredible places to which we could take the character. I wanted that - that movement.

### How had you pictured Jana before Manal portrayed, transformed, and appropriated her?

Physically, Jana was a hardened rebel. I'd stayed with the image from *Parisienne* and was a bit worried that Manal was too young, too sweet. In reality, it was the opposite, so there was a meeting between the actress and the character. We spent three years getting to know each other and so once we were on set, working with her was very fluid. Sometimes, we only had to look at each other to know what worked or what didn't work in the take. I cast the film's four main actors very

early on – Jana, her parents, and her boyfriend Adam, so we could get to know each other and discuss the film and Lebanon but also life, cinema and everyday things.

It was important for us and the film to have this time and build an honest connection. On set, Manal and the two actors playing her parents ended up forming a kind of real family. It was an incredible and moving experience. Especially that we actually filmed in my parents' apartment.

### Adam is played by Roger Azar. How did you meet him?

I saw him in a workshop in 2019 and we filmed in January of 2020. He had a certain way about him that felt very close to how I saw Adam even if he looked very different at the time – a little Che Guevarra. That was the starting point in bringing him towards Adam's character.

The love story between Jana and Adam comes late in the film, and it's obviously intentional. I got often criticized for that specially at the development stage, but it was a crucial. I didn't want the core of the film to be based on that relationship. The first third of the film where we see Jana with her parents, is undoubtedly more important to me and essential to the film's resolution.

### So what's equally important is the love story that reconnects her to her past, her relationship with her family, the city, its architecture, and ultimately the sea, which we even find in the title?

Yes, those are the elements critical to the film's gradual build up. The architecture tends to block the view of the sea, the horizon, and prospects more and more. The relationship with the sea is increasingly paradoxical in Beirut: the water's so polluted that you cannot swim in it. We turn our backs on our own horizon. I didn't film a romanticized Beirut with what's left of its traditional neighborhoods. I really wanted to film modern-day Beirut and how we experience it.

I wanted to take the viewer to another dimension so that they can see things the way Jana feels them, and that's something that the music also plays a big role in. My younger brother, Joh Dagher who composed the film's score has shared similar experiences to Jana and knew this alienation first hand. Feeling Alienation from your own city is something I've also experienced and It's omnipresent in the film.





**One of the most astonishing things about the film when you're familiar with Beirut is the way the sound is rendered. Beirut sometimes attacks those returning to it with its hysterical volume, both day and night. But here, on the contrary, you've refined it to the point of producing a muffled sound. You created a city out of thin air alienates with its silence.**

We did a lot of work on the sound. Usually, as soon as you make a film set in Beirut, the ambient sounds are very loud and take up a lot of space. I wanted the opposite because, recently, Beirut has stopped being that noisy city from before... Beirut can no longer afford to be a 24-hour city. It's a city that's experiencing moments of silence because of the deep crisis. It's a city whose inhabitants are starting to leave again. It's through sound that we start to realize this. For some time, there's been a general feeling of numbness in Lebanon, a stagnation, a suspension which was at the heart of writing this film. Overmixing that would have been a misinterpretation.

**You also wanted the picture to be wintery, filmed between dusk and dawn, with dominating petrol blue.**

The cinematography is by Shadi Shaaban – it's his second film working as a director of photography. Everything in the frame was planned: I worked on a detailed storyboard beforehand. And Shadi brought a particular, almost rainy, light. We shot in January 2020, but I wanted the exact period to be undetermined. Especially since the film never specifically identifies historical events; there is a crisis, a war, street battles in Hamra without saying which exact war it is, without giving the year, without pointing out a precise moment. The traumas aren't directly named. It's a series of events that renders us defenseless and infuses our daily lives.

**Everything in the picture is a symptom. Do the light and sound echo the trouble that's beginning to dwell within Jana?**

Yes, that's what I was going for. A coherence between what we see in the shot and what Jana is beginning to develop in her most subtle moments of dissociation. That's the core of the film: a state of mind fluctuating to the point of danger, a loss of vision, an absence of future, a slow derealization. It happens through this girl. Through her feelings, her raw emotions. Jana is suffering, like the rest of the country, from a past that has yet to be resolved, a present that is completely lost, and a future that, for the time being, doesn't exist – even as a mere prospect. For years, no one in Lebanon has known where their life is going.

The film was shot before the explosion that struck the city on August 4th and threw the Lebanese into a dangerous abyss. But through Jana's character, which I started writing in 2015, we clearly see that we'd already been in this state for years.

**Did the COVID situation complicate filming?**

We were lucky. The shoot wrapped one week before the first confinement. But the country and its economy were falling apart, and that had an impact on post-production. The editing process got pushed back and was occasionally interrupted (partly due to the August 4th explosion). The Lebanese economy which was already struggling, completely collapsed. I sometimes feel that this film just barely trickled through a whole series of disasters.

**And the title?**

For a long time, the project was called *Harvest*, which is the English translation of Jana: the one who harvests, who reaps all that is sown. It was a working title that I knew was temporary. *The Sea Ahead* came up in the last year, in the wake of a series of events that marked Lebanon and gave the film a particular character. We believed in it. Then came the fall. That's where the title came from – to make us face the sea and, as such, reality. It's not only Jana, but a more general feeling that confronts us. And what could be more general than the sea watching all of us. We're all the same facing the sea. And this film is not trying to judge anyone.



## BIO



Born in 1985, Beirut based **Ely Dagher** Graduated with an MA in contemporary Art Studies and New media from Goldsmiths College in London. Ely Dagher is an artist/filmmaker working with different mediums and producing work that intertwines on different levels. His work focuses on the layering and constructing of multiple narratives across film, painting and installation.

Drawing from his upbringing in Lebanon and his current situation, his work explores the correlation and possibilities created through the play between cultures, histories and fiction. Ely's artworks function as an extension to his interrogations, juggling between different points of identification and visual structures, from surrealism, science fiction and the occult. His latest short film "WAVES'98" (2015) was awarded the short film Palme D'Or at the 68th Cannes Film Festival. His films have been awarded at numerous international film festivals.

## CAST

JANA MANAL ISSA

ADAM ROGER AZAR

MONA, JANA'S MOTHER YARA ABOU HAIDAR

WISSAM, JANA'S FATHER RABIH EL ZAHER

WALID, JANA'S UNCLE FADI ABI SAMRA

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY **ELY DAGHER**

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY **SHADI CHAABAN**

EDITORS **LÉA MASSON, ELY DAGHER**

MUSIC **JOH DAGHER**

SOUND MIXER **RAWAD HOBEIKA**

SOUND DESIGNER **RANA EID**

RE-RECORDING MIXER **PHILIPPE CHARBONNEL**

PRODUCTION DESIGNER **SABINE SABBAGH**

WARDROBE DESIGNER **LARA MAE KHAMIS**

PRODUCTION SUPERVISOR **CHRISTIAN EID**

LINE PRODUCERS **GINGER BEIRUT PRODUCTIONS  
ABLA KHOURY  
LARA KARAM CHEKERDJIAN**

PRODUCED BY **ARNAUD DOMMERC**

CO-PRODUCERS **GEORGES SCHOUCAIR  
BENOÎT ROLAND  
MICHAEL B. CLARK  
ALEX TURTLETAUB**

ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS **ELY DAGHER  
MYRIAM SASSINE**

PRODUCTION **ANDOLFI**

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