



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
OUT OF COMPETITION
2019 OFFICIAL SELECTION

The Specials

a film by **Eric Toledano** and **Olivier Nakache**



Presents

Vincent
Cassel

Reda
Kateb

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Synopsis

For twenty years, Bruno and Malik have been living in a world apart, the world of autistic children and teenagers. Their respective associations train youngsters from difficult neighborhoods to care for these cases categorized as “extremely complex”. A special partnership for special personalities. ■



Interview

Éric Toledano and Olivier Nakache

How did this film come into being?

Éric Toledano: THE SPECIALS is the fruit of a twenty-year-old commitment. In 1994, we were monitors at a summer camp and I had to get a diploma to become a director (BAFD). That is where I met Stéphane Benhamou, the creator of the association "Le Silence des Justes", specialized in caring for autistic children and adolescents and integrating them into society. We lost sight of each other. But he later took an autistic member of my family under his wing. One day Olivier and I decided to take a look at the summer camp he ran in the mountains. We were deeply impressed by the energy and humanity that Stéphane and his team exuded. The chemistry between the young caregivers and the handicapped kids completely overwhelmed us.

Olivier Nakache: A little later, Stéphane needed a 6-minute film to present his association. He hoped to collect funds, because he was having trouble obtaining the necessary aids. So we took our little camera and both went to Saint-Denis, to the same place where twenty years later we were to film THE SPECIALS. We met a

young educator, Daoud Tatou, who also worked with autistic youngsters. And once again, this new experience remained profoundly etched in our minds...

Éric Toledano: We already said to ourselves, what a magnificent context for telling a story and making a film. But we were just starting out and we humbly thought we didn't yet have the wherewithal to handle a subject like this. We were simply not ready yet. That did not keep us from remaining close to these guys for whom we felt strong friendship and a real affinity. Four years ago, Canal+ offered us carte blanche for 26 minutes. We naturally chose to showcase their work and careers with a documentary entitled WE SHOULD MAKE A FILM ABOUT IT...

Olivier Nakache: ...a documentary about Stéphane and Daoud who in the meantime had become director of the association "Le Relais IDF". This organisation also cares for autistic youngsters, but that also advocates the social and professional integration of youngsters from underprivileged neighborhoods. It's true that between each of our feature films,

the idea of making this film kept coming up between us. It gained ground and the contact we kept with the two associations since the year 2000 no doubt whet our sensitivity to handicaps and contributed to the existence of a film like THE INTOUCHABLES.

THE SPECIALS is probably a compendium of all the obsessions that run through our films: a group at work, like in SAMBA, and duos like in THE INTOUCHABLES or LET’S BE FRIENDS.

Éric Toledano: Our movies always talk about implausible encounters. This one had a particular dimension: how people who communicate little, or not at all, and are considered abnormal, still manage to make so-called “normal” people who in our society no longer communicate, communicate. There is in these associations a harmony and blend of cultures, religions, identities and atypical pasts which should inspire many people...

Once you decided to shoot, how did you work?

Éric Toledano: For 2 years, we immersed ourselves in the two associations. The scenes in the film, including Valentin’s running away, are all real life experiences. In THE SPECIALS, we depict autistic youngsters, parents, and caregivers, but also the doctors, health officials, and the IGAS (General Inspection of Social Affairs). We couldn’t let ourselves stray too far from the truth or be too clumsily approximate. Our period of observation was very instructive, and the screenplay was fleshed out by experiences we shared on a daily basis. But what is more, after two years our motivation had multiplied. If when we started out, making this film was a strong desire, with time it became a necessity.

Olivier Nakache: It was impossible for us to tackle this subject without understanding it completely, without being in possession of all the complex issues. We needed to assimilate the subject technically in order to fuel the fiction we wanted to create

Éric Toledano: If only to outsmart the subject. Within that universe, for example, you hear language that is hard to understand if you’ve come in from the outside. There is a slew of incomprehensible acronyms like ARS, MDPH, IME USIDATU... that everyone else seems to know by heart. We also wanted to reproduce the light-handed humor we observed in the teams, like in the battle of the logos the young caregivers indulge in.

Olivier Nakache: The idea was also to include real monitors and real autistic youngsters in the film, to mix real life and fiction in a constant back and forth movement, and thus be able to intrude on the intimacy of the characters, their daily lives and personal issues.

You start out with a hand-held camera, as if you wanted to convey a feeling of absolute urgency...

Éric Toledano: We feel that the audience should almost have to «break into» the film. It should immediately be confronted by violence, as it actually exists. And the two characters that we describe are characterized primarily by the fact that they are forever on the move.

Olivier Nakache: These associations work with a sense of urgency, around the clock. So all that running around does make sense. We wanted to grab the viewer by the arm. Besides the music that accompanies the opening scene recalls the sound of an electrocardiogram.

We discover almost by chance that Bruno (Vincent Cassel), the character inspired by Stéphane Benhamou, is Jewish. As we later discover that his alter ego, Malik (Reda Kateb who plays the role of Daoud Tatou) is a Moslem. You never dwell on this subject...

Éric Toledano: Within these associations, religion and identity politics fade away to the benefit of humanity. That much is visible to the naked eye. Humanity transcends all those differences, which is what also captured our attention in the beginning. There is an open-mindedness, an attention to the other which is missing in our society. Against the background of today’s tense climate and inter-communal conflict, this film gives us a chance to showcase atypical life stories - stories that can serve as examples.

Olivier Nakache: We may have “idealized” our impressions, but over 2 years we had the time to understand that what could have been an issue here, really isn’t. One single thing counts, improving the lives of these innumerable youngsters.

Out of necessity, Bruno breaks some rules, opens apartments at night for autistic kids, puts to work caregivers who do not have the necessary diplomas...

Olivier Nakache: And he got an inspection because of his sidestepping the law. We found our angle for the film when we discovered the IGAS report concerning Stéphane’s association. That was one of our keys: the inspectors in charge of the investigation interviewed all of our characters. That was a way of structuring our story and defending the several points of view. In our society, some of the “powers that be” no longer work. But Bruno acts.

Éric Toledano: That’s the whole subject of the film. What

defines marginality and what defines normality? What the film shows is that sometimes you redefine them by transgressing them. We are going through times in which civil disobedience is gaining the upper hand. Transgression may be chaotic, but it is fertile. We have no answer to give in the film, no message to put across to the rest of humanity. The older we get, the surer we are about what it is important to question. In that sense, meeting with the various personalities we were lucky enough to rub shoulders with was absolutely fascinating.

Why did you choose Vincent Cassel and Reda Kateb to play Bruno and Malik?

Éric Toledano: We have been fans of those two actors for a long time. Before we even write a single line, we need an initial impetus, a stimulus. And for us, it often comes from the actors. We admire Vincent’s “transformist” talents, his propensity to “nick” the gestures and physique of the people he is supposed to embody. And then we liked having him play the role of a man who is not quite at ease with women. As for Reda, we have been watching him progress from film to film. He plays subtle and realistic, very charismatic. He too can truly incarnate people. Their encounter promised to be a fine moment of cinema. We wanted to use their energy.

How did you proceed?

Olivier Nakache: We tried a daring bet. We had separate meetings with them and told them: “*We have an idea for a film, we don’t have a screenplay, but we suggest that you spend two hours with us in one of the associations. If you don’t have the time, or the desire, we’ll stop right then and there. No problem. Otherwise, we’ll go together,*

and if you've had enough after an hour, we won't hold it against you" But essentially we weren't running any risks. All you have to do is spend a few minutes at "Silence des Justes" or "Relais IDF", for something very powerful to happen. We were convinced that we held the right formula. They came, and that very evening both texted us pretty much the same message: *"We don't need a screenplay to continue on with this adventure with you"*.

Éric Toledano: That was a shot in the arm. We introduced them to each other. They didn't know each other, but wanted to work together.

In the film, Malik (Reda Kateb) teaches his caregivers etiquette, French and punctuality...

Olivier Nakache: He gives them a global formation, "you come, you accept the rules, you are formed, and you'll see, you'll come out a winner". He's gifted with intelligence, instinct and the gift of the gab. He gives them the keys to work with, but also to make themselves respected by society and find their place in it.

These caregivers are mostly from the universe of diversity present in all your films...

Olivier Nakache: Diversity is one of the main components of their associations. Most of

the caregivers are from underprivileged neighborhoods. They are familiar with violence and take it from their autistic charges, without turning it against them. And for someone who does not count for much in our society, becoming a caregiver is a very interesting parable. Besides, we discovered among them some true acting talent! It was obvious to us: they had to play in the film.

And Bryan Mialoundama who plays Dylan?

Olivier Nakache: We immediately sensed his sincerity during the auditions. He wasn't acting. He reminded us of the caregivers who show up at Stéphane or Daoud's. He had unbelievable eyes, and you could sense the violence and truth within him. He was a like a block of marble waiting to be carved.

Éric Toledano: We needed an outside look in order to enter into the story. Dylan is the one who doesn't know, who asks questions like why is this autistic kid hitting me just after giving me a hug? He is the audience's eye.

How did you find the autistic kids who play in the film?

Éric Toledano: "Scrolling" through all the associations of Paris and the Paris region, we had a hit on Turbulences (an arts group that employs people who have





communication issues, suffer from autism or related issues). The ESAT (Establishment of Service Aid Through Work) is located in a circus tent at the Porte d'Asnières, and we offered to create a theater workshop. It was in that workshop that we met Benjamin Lesieur, who plays Joseph. He has a very winning personality. He didn't speak, or he communicated in a random fashion, citing names of French singers or asking the same question over and over again: *"what did the weather man have to say tonight?"* We quickly realized that he enjoyed the workshop. We started treating him like any other actor: we offered him the role. His parents warned us it would be complicated. He never wore a tie, a belt or socks, and he couldn't stand anyone touching his skin and hair. But they agreed. During the 25 days of shooting, we got him into a tie, belt and socks, we made him up and did his hair. We figured out that Benjamin really liked the costume crew, Isabelle and especially the dresser, Marine. they are the one who used niceness and psychology to get him to wear the clothes they wanted him to. Marine wound up playing the role of Brigitte, the young employee at the company where Joseph works. No one else could do it. She objected *"but I'm not an actress!"*. We told her *"Trust us..."*. And she was perfect.

Olivier Nakache: During the shoot, we asked Benjamin, *"Do that again, get back into place, go back to the beginning, come on, we're going to do another take..."* and he was perfect, just like all the other professional actors. Talking with the doctors, we realized that the cinema uses a very autistic-like process of repetition: supervised and repetitive. We organized the entire preparation around Benjamin. We showed him the sets before filming. We rehearsed scenes with him. At the same time, he could say anything he wanted. He sometimes put his head on a technician's shoulder. We were ourselves experiencing exactly what we were talking about in the film.

Éric Toledano: He was soon our buddy, and we even stole some ideas from him. The line *"I am innocent!"* for example, comes from him. He loved repeating certain dialogues in a loop, and we kept some of them, like *"We're not far!"* Benjamin soon became the film's mascot, and the dance scene profoundly moved the entire technical crew.

And Valentin (Marco Locatelli)?

Éric Toledano: His brother is autistic. A very serious case as a matter of fact. Astoundingly mature, Marco came to the casting session without telling anyone, explaining, *"I have a little brother who's autistic. Making this movie will help me*

come closer to him, help me to love him". He did some convincing screen tests, and we explained to him that there were going to be quite a few working sessions with us and some behavioral coaches. We spoke to his mother about it, who said: "*It's up to him. I have total trust in you*". Marco's presence made sense to us.

You try several times to make us understand Valentin's autistic sensations in a very sensorial way...

Olivier Nakache: You can't depict what someone autistic feels or sees. But what we are sure about, is that such children focus on certain sounds. Some calm them, others aggress them. We wanted to try to reproduce that without using too many effects in order to adopt his own point of view, his own subjectivity.

Éric Toledano : We had to confront reality: a hospital discharge after six months of confinement. All the doctors told us: you don't get out like that, you have to set up gradual releases. You start with once a week for three months before risking a definitive release. That is why Malik (Reda Kateb) chooses to assign Dylan as Valentin's caregiver. Their technique is 1 for 1. Despite Dylan's clumsiness, something worked. It's chemistry. It doesn't always work, that's for sure, but when it does work, it's mighty impressive.

Did you have to deal with any crises on the set?

Olivier Nakache: Yes, but we had to manage them, and we absolutely wanted to show that part of the truth in the film. In any event, we had to endlessly adapt, improvise. Especially during group scenes like the skating rink, for example. There were always three cameras on location, permanently ready to film.

Hélène Vincent plays Benjamin's confused mother...

Éric Toledano: We share a long history with Hélène that began with SAMBA. This actor, whom we are particularly fond of, has a kind of double nationality: she can be very moving in one film and very funny in the next. She is a very SPECIAL actor! We could not make this film without giving the floor to the parents. We often heard the words that Hélène's character pronounces: "What will happen to him when I'm no longer here? They are cute when they're little, but when they grow up, people no longer look at them the same". When the diagnosis of autism comes in, parents do not have time to think of the future, they are all fired up for immediate combat. There is no possible remission. You're in for 30, 40, 50 years. The world is then split in two: those who help you and those who won't even look at you.

You often say "*Behind the laughter, there are tears*", you could almost turn that around: "*Behind the tears, there is laughter*"?

Éric Toledano: Comedy is sometimes sadness in disguise, but more than that, it is our way to express ourselves and communicate with each other. In these associations, you run through an entire gamut of emotions, laughter obviously being one of them. It just has to fit into the situation intelligently. As with Bruno, who accumulates romantic trysts with women of the Jewish community, organized by his entourage that would like to see him marry. Being humorous is also being Special, or in other words breaking the rules, and of course it takes the sting out of certain situations. Taking a step back, keeping some distance.

Like in C'EST LA VIE, the film ends on a very poetic scene...

Olivier Nakache: That scene is a perfect illustration of the overall gist of the film. The context may be harsh, but poetry, movement and music prevail. At the end of his choreography, Joseph returns to the center of the circle around which he was dancing. Alone under the lights, he incarnates all our characters' combats: keeping these kids, adolescents and adults in the center of things, never losing sight of them, and never banishing them from our daily lives.

Éric Toledano: Benjamin is truly poetic. For 2 years, we were constantly surprised. By a kid with autism who at dinner eats off your own plate. This group of autistic kids dances, each with his and her own pathology, each in their own world, but all of them together. When Bruno is most cornered, and may have to shut down his association, he watches those kids dance and feels moved. That emotion is essentially also our own. It's what we felt throughout our preparation for the shoot, and what we tried to reconstitute throughout the film. ■





Interview Vincent Cassel

What was your first contact like with Éric Toledano and Olivier Nakache?

When they first offered me the film, they explained to me how important it was to them... They had had this project for a long time, but did not yet feel totally ready to direct it. I remember, they had not yet written a single line when we first met. I just asked them not to make me read 12 000 drafts of the screenplay. I explained that I was in no hurry, and that I would wait for them.

Had you wanted to work with them?

Yes, and I told them so. I was very curious. I knew their work, I saw what they were able to do, but I did not really know how they managed to do it. I quickly understood. They have faith in their screenplay, but they keep on searching for stuff all the time. For me, true actor's direction is the way a director, or in this case, two directors look at an actor. They discerned something in me that I did not suspect was there, things I didn't know I was capable of "bringing out".

Do you remember your first visit to the association The "Silence des Justes"?

I was rather discombobulated. But also completely overcome. I was surprised to find myself in tears. I asked myself: *"How am I going to work with these kids, these teens and these adults? How will I detach myself from these sometimes very serious cases of autism?"* Observing Stéphane and our contacts there, I understood that they dedicated their lives to bettering those of their "residents", at the price of their own. Unsentimentally. They are "doers". The autistic suffer from an inability to communicate. But when you stimulate them, you can enrich their sensory baggage. In other words, a guy who has spent twenty years in this officially recognized not-for-profit organization does not look the same as someone who is just starting out.

How did you shake off those fears you mentioned?

I had to face up to my own issues. I spent time with them, and especially I stopped being such a crybaby. I told myself time and again that I should not be afraid to step up to the front lines and get slapped in the face two or three times. Some of them

are actually pretty burly. One day, Éric and Olivier took me to be interviewed by the Papotin, a paper put out by autistic teenagers and adults. And that experience also acted as a trigger.

Why?

They invite personalities (football players, musicians, actors, politicians...) under a circus tent to be interviewed by a panel of journalists. Some of them become so obsessed by one detail, that no one can follow them anymore. Others will recite a poem based on onomatopoeia. An abstract, fun poetic experience, with some obvious pearls. There is no room for pretense or sham. You're "naked" out there. You just have to let yourself go.

You had a “model”: Stéphane Benhamou...

Bruno, my character, is Stéphane without being Stéphane. Of course, I went to see him alone at the association, or went for a spin with him from time to time. I observed his silhouette, his physical attitudes, what he exuded as a human being. It may seem strange, but I often think of the characters I play in terms of textures. Stéphane has a way of carrying himself that says a lot to me. It tells us who he is. He only came on set twice and still!... We had to drag him there. His work is so urgent. Altruism? Humanism? The reasons for which he does what he does are in fact very simple.

You're talking about of his body, but what precisely did you “borrow” from him?

His goatee, his eyes – he often abstains from looking at people to avoid making them feel uncomfortable – his worrying too. I started out with the loneliness I perceived in

a man without a wife or children, and who finds fulfilment by giving love to the autistic with whom he works. But we extrapolated with Stéphane. Like the “Shidduch*” he makes use of.

He is a practicing Jew, and works with Malik, a Muslim played by Reda Kateb...

From the very start, we asked ourselves: “What do we do about religion?” It's in there with the kippas, veils and mezuzot... Besides, we shot some scenes that evoked it even more, but Éric and Olivier cut them out during the edit. And that's just as good. In the film, religion is shown as it is practiced in these associations. An issue that everywhere else is ticklish and inextricable is not like that at all for their members.

Besides, Malik only reveals in an offhand line that he is a Muslim and has three children...

And furthermore, he says it as a joke, while sitting in on the “Shidduch” that Bruno does everything to avoid.

The “Shidduchim” are the pretext for some rather comical scenes...

From “Hate” to “Irreversible”, I have always tried to inject some comedy into my darkest roles. Here I play a guy who is so involved in his work, that I was sometimes afraid I was the least funny character in the film. Luckily, in those encounters Bruno constantly screws up. You become a couple when you feel like you want to. He has so much to do. I respect the “Shidduch” but falling in love is not always easy. The other person really has to match a bucket list of 15 criteria. In that case, if it works you really have to believe in God...

Did you know- Reda Kateb?

I felt like we were members of the same family. I like his somewhat smashed in face, his Benicio Del Toro or Javier Bardem look. He's large caliber. A street dandy. The epitome of class. Our encounter was equal to what I was expecting. I also loved the comic power and generosity of Alban Ivanov. What an obvious choice! When he arrives late on set because he didn't hear the word “Action”, you really should be filming him. That in itself is very interesting.

You have many scenes with Benjamin Lesieur (Joseph). How did you approach them?

Were we playing? Not playing? We played. Although I couldn't say at what. I felt reassured when he was having fun too. Finding his rhythm. Doing second takes. He was thrilled to be there. In the right place. Happy. Well yes, as an actor, he does have some peculiarities And that's how I talked to him: “*It would be a lot easier if you stepped to one side, repeat after me, say it once more.*” Éric and Olivier are two voices. They never get in each other's way, but they sometimes do give different indications and too bad for you. (Laughter). I soon went to ask them: “*Please stop talking to him. I'm the one who does that. Like Bruno in the film*”. Okay, of course it didn't always work. Historically, Benjamin is the first of the autistic kids whom Stéphane took care of. If he doesn't want to give you the time of day, he'll cut you dead. But if he likes you, he is capable of some very powerful emotional demonstrations.

The dance scene is crazily poetic...

Some of them dance. Some play the piano. Others slam, and you don't always understand everything, but wow!.. is it ever beautiful ! And then there are some who don't

do anything. One day, during a workshop, I saw one of them lying in a booth with the little lights they light up to stimulate the autistic. 15 years ago, he didn't express himself because he couldn't speak, but what intelligence in his eyes – the eyes of the Little Prince – they transfix you. What lurks behind those eyes? What can his thought processes be like?

The film asks a basic question: should you upset norms?

Can you allow yourself to think differently? Anyone who in today's society has something to offer thinks differently. Stéphane Benhamou goes all out to find solutions in a system that has gone haywire. He disregards the legislator. And inspires legislators who will perhaps help the situation evolve. THE SPECIALS is not a film about autism; it is about commitment and people who care for others.

In what state of mind did you approach the scene that pits you against the IGAS inspectors?

We had to find a rhythm and an imperative to respect: not to turn the sequence into the “emotional sequence”. Bruno is angry, but he knows what he wants. Is there a little bit of cunning in his attitude? In Brazil, they have an expression for that: you need to know how to cry to obtain what you need.

The monitors you play with paint the portrait of a generation that is involved...

They have found a meaning for their lives. Éric and Olivier do not go into the woes of the inner city. They show a band of super heroes 19-20 years old who do a job that three-quarters of us would be incapable of doing. ■



Interview Reda Kateb

You often say that each of your films is a voyage. How did this one start?

I immediately felt “chemically” confident with Éric and Olivier, who came to see me in the small café where I hang out in Montreuil. I felt that in spite of the considerable success of their films, they too shared this idea of a voyage. The desire to always put the counters at zero, to consider each feature film your first. I understood the force, the restlessness, the “electric charge” that animated them: paying tribute to the work of Stéphane Benhamou and Daoud Tatou. I got carried away when I screened their documentary: ON DEVRAIT EN FAIRE UN FILM. I didn’t know anything about autism other than what I saw in films like RAIN MAN or SHINE. Here it was a question of playing with “non-verbal autistic youngsters”. Olivier took me to visit the premises of “Le Silence des justes”. I was immediately captivated, but also very touched. I discovered a very rich world that promised an intense adventure in which I would move freely. Éric et Olivier make a big deal out of the actor’s freedom. They are very committed to it.

Your character, Malik, is inspired by Daoud Tatou, how did you work with him?

Before even reading the script, I got into one of those vans that pick up autistic kids each morning at their family homes to drive them to their activities. I went to play soccer with them in a gym and to lunch at “Le Relais IDF”, his association. Then Daoud took me to Morocco, to Rabat and especially Oujda, where he is building the first center for the autistic in North Africa. Like “Le Silence des Justes”, it has a magnificent name: “Les Oiseaux du Paradis” (Birds of Paradise). The situation of the autistic is even worse there than here in France. So we went to visit a family with several autistic children. One of them was tied to the wall. I spent the following night staring at pictures of my 4-year-old son on my phone. When you see the distress of some situations and the humane response that Stéphane and Daoud bring, a kind of responsibility begins to weigh on you at the idea of playing them. Some kind of validation on their part was important to me. I received their blessing, but I also had to free myself from them, because THE SPECIALS is not a biopic about Stéphane and Daoud.

Where did you find your freedom?

In the points of convergence between Daoud and myself. Empathy, dynamism, endurance. And uncomplicated relations with kids from neighborhoods I never got very far away from. I was part-monitor, part-educator in the Paris suburb of Vitry-sur-Seine. I sponsor a movie festival, “Ciné-banlieues”. Talking to them or listening to them was not a role of composition role for me. All I had to do was to draw on my day-to-day experiences. Before “stumbling across” autism, as he himself says, Daoud was a rapper. He’s almost a showman. When you sit in on one of his meetings with his monitors, they certainly get their work done, but they also laugh a lot, and you get the feeling that there is a “show” going on. It’s the same thing in Morocco, where during interminable discussions with the local authorities, he moves mountains in in no time at all. We are up against walls. He finds the breach and charges through it. With him, in the end closed doors always open.

Malik shakes up the monitors pretty much when he demands punctuality, commitment and respect for the French language...

When they first show up at the association, these kids lack structures and bearings. The film is a parable about the energy of these neighborhoods. It shows that when you treat these kids with trust, while still remaining vigilant, they grow up and the road to a professional life in the future opens up to them. Daoud has a 100% success rate with kids who until then were holding up the walls in the projects. They all end up with a diploma. But Stéphane and Daoud are animated by something greater than themselves. The cause always comes first. Faith is also very important to them.

Exactly. Did you speak with the directors about the issue of religion, which is just hinted at in the film?

We spoke about it as early as our first meetings. I was a little worried before I received the screenplay. I was afraid of the cliché of the sacred union of Jews and Arabs working together. What could have become a Benetton ad about peace, which is not at all my cup of tea. I think that today everything is reduced to religion. At the same time, Éric et Olivier started out on the basis of real life. Back then, they told me that they could not promise that the question would not come up. When I saw the film, I felt reassured. Religion is in there of course, but in its rightful place, a little as it should be everywhere else.

Were you afraid beforehand to confront the autistic actors in the movie?

A little bit, yes, and I had to move beyond that apprehension. They’re angels, but their handicap can manifested itself with elbow jabs and headbutts. There is nothing violent about the origins of all that. They do not feel their bodies, even if it is difficult to generalize, because more than 250 types of autism have been identified. In terms of code and habits, we feel lost before them. I didn’t have to tame them, they had to tame me. Their caregivers work on every word, every attitude, every gesture. And nothing can ever be taken for granted. Before the shoot, I got close to a youngster with African origins, a very serious case. He smiled at me while he was eating. But on the set, once he saw me he ran away. Don’t purloin anything from them. Those were our orders. They have no filters, no ulterior motives. We actors sometimes do. Will people like what

I’m doing? Will this role bring me others? All that stuff that interferes with our work. With them, you have to find another type of communication. During Benjamin’s dance, we slipped into the auditorium without being filmed. Actors sometimes produce imitations using the truth, or vice versa, whereas autistic kids are always true.

The film is also a comedy, but you didn’t have that much comedy to do, or did you?

Éric and Olivier pace things like comedians, but their comedy is first and foremost human. Before the shoot, one of my neighbors came to see me for an autograph. He asked me: “why do you always look sop sullen in your movies?” I told Olivier the anecdote and he said: “Come on, this take is for your neighbor”. With this film, I had the impression of playing a piano, and pressing keys I had never played before. Then again, everything is so fluid between Éric and Olivier. When one is feeling down, the other takes over We had a four-handed director, so we always had someone wide awake across from us.

What was it like meeting Vincent Cassel?

Vincent and I really met while working. I really wanted to work with him, but we started out sniffing each other like the two actor-animals we are. On set, it was a joy to see him send back the balls I sent him, with the warm heart and spontaneity that are his trademark. He accepted traveling with me on the film in another way, not in a cinematic adventure, but like me in a human adventure. He opened up to others, but remained reserved too. Three takes later, we felt a true

camaraderie. Once we heard the word “lights”, we were on the starting-blocks.

In life, should we go about breaking with norms?

Absolutely. At the origin of this project is a paradox. A contradiction. It involves the Ministry of Health that on the one hand does not want to approve these organizations, but on the other hand, implicitly realizes that no one else could do the work they do and that they are indispensable. In the middle of all that, there are lives: autistic kids, but also their families. For them, the deflagration is terrible, and they are the most precarious – they cannot keep their children, they need that breath of fresh air. –like always, they are the ones who suffer most.

You talk a lot about ethics regarding your artistic choices...

I would never accept a role I didn’t agree with. Today I would very much like to attend the inauguration of the Oujda center and screen THE SPECIALS in an open-air theater. No film could transport me more and farther than this one: that is to say to the heart of a France that is both utopian and real, the France in which I want to live. ■



Interview Stéphane Benhamou and Daoud Tatou

When and how did you create your two associations, “Le Silence des justes”, and “Le Relais IDF”?

Stéphane Benhamou: I discovered autism in 1992, when I took in a teenager who suffered from it at the summer camp I directed. I created “Le Silence des Justes” four years later. Autism was recognized as a public health problem in April of 1995, but there were no structures for dealing with it. So the delay was considerable, and it still is. At first we opened an ordinary facility, and then we specialized. We obtained our first authorization in 2007. But the association was truly given a “boost” in 2010 when a magistrate entrusted us with a first autistic case. That is how the first round-the-clock medicalized emergency structure was born. Today, 59 “residents” live in our apartments.

Daoud Tatou: “Le Relais IDF” was created in 2000. As of that date, the association has taken care of the complex cases we give precedence to on the weekends. Stéphane and I then extended our

presence to weekdays too. I have been working with Stéphane since 1996, when I ran into him at the Théâtre Le Lucernaire in Paris where I was putting on plays with autistic youngsters. A friend asked me to organize some workshops. My career has been different from Stéphane’s. I was a monitor-educator, and then I worked with Howard Buten – an American psychologist who specializes in autism, a writer and a clown. We soon began to run the experiment together on complex cases at Stéphane’s summer camp. Because I came from an underprivileged neighborhood, I had the idea of putting young people from the same neighborhoods to work taking care of people affected by the disease.

What has kept you going all these years?

Stéphane Benhamou: The first autistic case I met was a teenager unable to communicate. I wanted to understand why. I opened my summer camp to him.

When he left, he asked if he could come again. All Daoud and I did was answer the requests that came rolling in.

Daoud Tatou: I was 17 when I “stumbled across” autism. I am now 45. I didn’t understand the violence of autistic people. How could they suddenly rear up and smash everything without any warning? I searched, and I’m still searching for an answer.

Listening to you, it sounds like everything was built up as you met people and received requests?

Daoud Tatou: Nothing was planned. At the start, we grew without a blueprint. Then I set up “Le Relais IDF”, with insurance and with social security approval, and I began to provide formation, to sort of recompense the kids who were helping us out.

Stéphane Benhamou: The autistic community made us what we are today. We filled in the gaps, we slipped through the interstices into the system to make up for the deficiencies of the political powers that provide us with too few means.

You received a favorable report from the IGAS (General Inspection of Social Affairs), but you still have to haggle in an Ubuesque situation...

Stéphane Benhamou: We actually got two favorable reports from the IGAS.

Daoud Tatou: The ARS (Regional Health Agencies) entrusts us with complex cases. But it’s expensive. And the regions can no longer pay. Suddenly everyone is pulling in different directions to cover themselves. They send us the police of the police which is to say the IGAS, and they spend a month going over the association

with a fine tooth comb. We finally won. We can receive autistic cases and train our youngsters. They recognized that we fill a gap.

Stéphane Benhamou: But we receive no supplementary funds, space or certifications.

The film shows how institutions select their autistic cases. Do you choose those you take in?

Stéphane Benhamou: Once the obligatory observation period has passed - because that does exist - some institutions do in fact refuse certain profiles on the pretext that they do not fit in with them. We accept everyone, once an ASD (Autism spectrum disorder) diagnosis has been made.

Daoud Tatou: Those autism spectrum disorders cover a very broad field: co-morbidities, epilepsy, violence...

Stéphane Benhamou: We and our teams then examine the feasibility of treatment and we go to work. We never turn anyone away.

Daoud Tatou: When someone knocks at our door, we open it. But the politicians implore us: “Leave your door closed, you already have a full house” Selection is a very real phenomenon. Directors of the structures receive a global budgetary envelope for the year with a ratio of one educator for 3 cases, one educator for 6, but when we are dealing with complex cases, we need one caregiver per patient. In France, we are short 37 000 places. That means 37 000 children out in the cold. An institution will take the case that sleeps all day, knocked out by doses that would kill a horse: he won’t bother a fly. It will reject the case that is agitated and violent , and needs constant supervision.

Stéphane Benhamou: From 2000 to 2010, Daoud and

I discovered apocalyptic situations hidden away in psychiatric hospitals. You could go up to a room whose walls were covered in excrement. The autistic patient who is there is quite simply in an inappropriate structure.

Daoud Tatou: Together, we have the dynamism and strength needed to organize off the cuff :classes, field trips, etc... for those complex cases.

How effective are the socializing activities you have set up?

Stéphane Benhamou: We have observed that 80% of our cases improve with socialization.

Daoud Tatou: It depends primarily on empathy: there too. There too, we have 80% success. « *I accept you, with all your issues. So you want to go out into the street naked? No problem. You’ll do it 199 times, but the 200th time, you’ll keep your pants on and we will have achieved something* ». It then depends on education: we need to explain to folks that these people have the right to be with others, just like anyone else. Living the life of a recluse is not living at all.

Stéphane Benhamou: The autistic common denominator is the inability to communicate, which cuts them off from our way of functioning. And therefore from the world, if they are not accompanied.

What needs to be changed?

Stéphane Benhamou: We need lots of finance. When you’re talking accompaniment and formation, you’re talking big bucks.

Daoud Tatou: And those who make the laws need to listen to the people who relate their experiences in the field. You might then create the necessary framework

for the atypical structures we have set up.

Stéphane Benhamou: There is a blatant gap, once a diagnosis has been made: a child diagnosed at the age of 3 should receive immediate care from a specialized unit. The child cannot wait three or four years to be placed in an institution. First, because the child is suffering, but also because during that time its condition will deteriorate and therefore triple its cost society. We also lack partnerships in the children’s sector, i.e., setting up a network of health and medico-educational facilities. We need to train school aids to deal with autism.

Daoud Tatou: What Stéphane is saying is crucial. Teachers, professors, and schoolteachers have not been formed. We know that well, those of us who regularly fight to keep some of our children in school. What usually happens? The case goes up to the chief education officer who decrees: “Put him in an IME” (A Medico-Educational Institution). Whereas all it would take for the child to continue in school would be to be accompanied.

Stéphane Benhamou: We have to stop lying to the world of tomorrow. If in class, the children frequent other, handicapped children, when those children later become business leaders they will not have any trouble including autistic adults in their small and medium-sized businesses. They won’t have to ask: “*What the hell is autism?*”

When did Éric Toledano and Olivier Nakache arrive at your sides?

Stéphane Benhamou: Twenty years ago. The first time we met is when they filmed their six-minute video clip

for “Le Silence des justes”. They became very emotional. And they’ve never abandoned the association since. Even after they became famous with THE INTOUCHABLES, they came back to see us. They followed us and helped us in all the many situations we went through.

Daoud Tatou: We were involved in it. We were overwhelmed by the film. We said to ourselves: we were able to do all that – a half drop of water in the ocean we have to fill – but we still have just as many problems.

Stéphane Benhamou: I also thought of the families. Éric and Olivier finally lift the veil on the treatment of autistic people. 37 000 families still live a nightmare in the dark, second after second, 24 hours a day. When the le diagnosis comes in, there is no more family or life. The families are left in angst-ridden isolation.

Daoud Tatou: Worse yet. Certain aging parents have told us: “I am going to kill myself, and take him with me. I don’t want him to end up in a psychiatric hospital after my death. I fought all my life to keep him out of there.” First, it’s the couple that breaks down. Then the siblings. The parents – and it’s understandable – will often concentrate all their efforts on the autistic child, often to the detriment of the others, who feel neglected. But it also impacts family finances: unless he child

is cared for, many parents have to stop working and find themselves in a fine mess.

The film also focuses very closely on the monitors...

Daoud Tatou: That is also very realistic. We were able to set up a structure with the monitors being made up of neighborhood teenagers. At first, they didn’t want to clean up human excrement or get punched in the face. We insisted on creating a formula and imagined something that could last. If we were able to make our municipal politicians sensitive to the handicapped, it might also encourage inserting young people into the sector of care giving, in old people’s homes, for example. That is to say doing thankless jobs no one wants to do. The neighborhood recruiting grounds are waiting for something like that. We even had youngsters hired at the AP-HP, the psychiatric hospitals of the Île-de-France. We did not come with the help of the law. It was all done empirically, with humor and humanity. We have to conserve that vitality and empathy.

Did you immediately accept the idea of the film?

Stéphane Benhamou: We agreed once our psychiatrists validated the scenario. Unlike what you may sometimes hear here





and there, we are responsible people. Everything was very transparent. And we did not change anything about the way we operate. We did not adapt ourselves to the film, the film adapted to us.

Daoud Tatou: But it is the first feature film with real autistic people and real caregivers.

You had to accept the presence of two actors: Vincent Cassel and Reda Kateb?

Stéphane Benhamou: At our first meeting, I could tell that Vincent was interested: he asked a lot of questions. And he approached the children. I didn't feel like I was dealing with an actor. He was 'caught up'. But I did not adapt my work to his schedule. He adapted his to mine.

Daoud Tatou: It was the same with Reda. A real human being, and, especially, very sensitive. I suggested that he accompany me to Morocco – I am in charge of an NGO that works with autism – telling him: "If you want to understand, come eat stones with me." Neither Vincent nor Reda ever acted like stars. We spoke to them like Stéphane and I speak to the CEOs we occasionally meet: "You have money, we have autistic people. What can we come up with together?" What we look at are the technicalities. Who can bring what to our combat?

Stéphane Benhamou: That's true, but when I see Reda Kateb, I see Daoud.

Daoud Tatou: And when I see Vincent Cassel, I see him mimicking Stéphane.

What are you expecting from this film?

Stéphane Benhamou: That it casts light on our complex cases, even if things are beginning to move and the administration is waking up. Today we see the prospect of more appropriate treatment. I told Éric and Olivier: "*I hope that there will be a before and after THE SPECIALS*".

Daoud Tatou: And that it may touch the politicians. We would like the film to raise the awareness of all deciders, and even of the President of the French Republic. ■

Cast

Bruno.....	Vincent Cassel
Malik	Reda Kateb
Hélène.....	Hélène Vincent
Dylan.....	Bryan Mialoundama
Menahem	Alban Ivanov
Joseph	Benjamin Lesieur
Valentin.....	Marco Locatelli
Docteur Ronssin.....	Catherine Mouchet
Inspecteur IGAS.....	Frédéric Pierrot
Inspectrice IGAS.....	Suliane Brahim de la Comédie française
Ludivine.....	Lyna Khoudri
Shirel.....	Aloïse Sauvage
Fabrice.....	Djibril Yoni
Mounir.....	Ahmed Abdel-Laoui
Cédric	Darren Muselet
Eva.....	Sophie Garric

Crew

Directed by	Éric TOLEDANO et Olivier NAKACHE
Screenplay by	Éric TOLEDANO et Olivier NAKACHE
Production Company	QUAD et TEN CINEMA
En coproduction avec	GAUMONT, TF1 FILMS PRODUCTION, BELGA PRODUCTIONS, 120 FILMS
In coproduction with	CANAL+, OCS, TF1, CINE+
Produced by.....	Nicolas DUVAL ADASSOVSKY
Executive Producer	Hervé RUET
Artistic collaboration	Mathieu VADEPIED
Editor	Dorian RIGAL-ANSOUS
Cinematography	Antoine SANIER
Sound	Pascal ARMANT
.....	Selim AZZAZI
.....	Jean-Paul HURIER
Casting	Justine LEOCADIE
.....	Elodie DEMEY (A.R.D.A.)
.....	Marie-France MICHEL
Set design	Julia LEMAIRE
Continuity	Christelle MEAUX
Location Manager	Amaury SERIEYE
Costume design	Isabelle PANNETIER
1 st Assistant Director	Mathieu VAILLANT
Original Music	Vincent Piant

