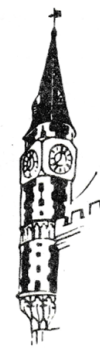


# DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY

## 2022/23 SEASON



### CASABLANCA BEATS

(Language: Arabic)

Director: Nabil Ayouch, 2021. Running time: 101 minutes.  
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 10<sup>th</sup> October, 2022.

“Nabil Ayouch’s rousing, Arabic-language drama, two teenage boys begin singing about sex and fame, as their gleeful classmates, many of them wild-haired girls, leap around. “We want money”, chant the kids, who are all played by non-professionals from hard-scrabble suburb, Sidi Moumen. The young cast deserve to become filthy rich (the song ‘Drahem’ is already on Spotify and I beg you to check it out; it’s even cuter than *Turning Red*’s boy-band-ballad pastiche, ‘Nobody Like U’). The film itself, though, is chasing a different kind of success.

The story’s set in an arts centre and the central character is rapper Anas (real-life Moroccan musician, Anas Basbousi aka Bawss), whose task is to introduce adolescents to “positive” hip-hop.

Good teachers often make for bad movies. And unworldly Anas does, at times, conform to the inspirational teacher type spoofed in *Derry Girls*. Remember Ms De Brun, who lived in an empty flat and said “everything I own I can fit into a suitcase” (right before taking a swanky job so she could beat “crippling” mortgage rates)? Well, Anas is even more spartan. He lives in his car.

For the most part, however, the semi-improvised script avoids cliches. Anas respects boundaries. He rarely makes speeches. And, unlike the white pedagogues in, say, *Dangerous Minds* or *Dead Poets Society*, he zones in on local issues. For so many reasons, suicide bombers weren’t on Mr Keating’s syllabus.

A shot of Anas on a roof, ruefully observing hundreds of men kneeling for prayers, is brilliantly and quietly provocative. Anas is increasingly viewed by adult members of the community as a Pied Piper, because he encourages girls and boys to interact. Let’s just say, *Casablanca Beats* has a fresh take on Pied Pipers.

Much is conveyed, too, by the fashions the youngsters adopt. The boys who sing Drahem, for example, are positively flamboyant. Ismail (Ismail Adouab) has a hair-do like De La Soul's Posdnuos, circa 1989. Meanwhile Mehdi (Mehdi Razzouk), in owlish glasses, resembles a preppy Parisian catwalk model. Parts of Sidi Moumen are practically pre-industrial (in certain night-time scenes, the only light is provided by glowing mobile phones). But Ayouch refuses to rub our noses in such deprivation. We don't feel like poverty tourists, for the simple reason that these characters aren't defined by what they lack, but what they have, which is style and talent to spare...

The arts centre is a real-life institution that Ayouch founded in 2014. Basbousi has worked there for years. The pair know what they're talking about and it's a pure pleasure to watch and learn."

Charlotte O'Sullivan, *Evening Standard*, 29<sup>th</sup> April, 2022.

"This Moroccan film really captures the way music – hip-hop, specifically – can be used to articulate the harsh realities of marginalised lives. Director Nabil Ayouch was inspired to make *Casablanca Beats* after rapper Anas Basbousi launched a popular hip-hop programme at Les Etoiles, the cultural centre Ayouch co-founded in the deprived neighbourhood of Sidi Moumen. Ayouch's film, which features a cast of non-professional teens playing fictionalised versions of themselves, offers a vibrant and sometimes inspiring account of the programme's success – though his narrative sadly lacks focus. It's a disjointed jam that would probably work better as a polished bop.

The film begins with Anas pitching his hip-hop programme to the cultural centre's sceptical director. After he gets his way, early scenes show him taking a tough-love approach with students by calling out any hint of inauthenticity in their lyrics. Evidently it works, because the students are soon hooked on hip-hop and determined to do better. Ayouch underlines the fact that hip-hop gives these kids a much-needed creative outlet by showing glimpses of their home lives. Nouhalia uses music to assert herself in front of hostile female peers, while Meryem is reprimanded by her older brother for wanting to perform at all. Sadly, many of these scenes are as thinly drawn as Anas' own backstory, which makes it difficult to connect with characters who could be engaging. For this reason, the film's emotional beats don't hit as hard as its musical ones.

*Casablanca Beats* also includes some thoughtful group discussions exploring the ways in which religion, feminism and self-expression intersect in a Muslim society that remains fundamentally traditional. Anas' message to his students is trite but undeniable: only by speaking their truth can they begin to make things better for themselves and their community. Frustratingly, these compelling moments are bookended by some clumsy narrative jumps. When the kids

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suddenly decide to put on a concert, it feels jarring because there's been no previous hint that this is what they were working towards. Still, there's no doubting that Ayouch captures the angry consternation of some Sidi Moumen locals who object to seeing young women take to the stage.

Despite the prevailing vagueness, Ayouch manages to give his story a rousing and cinematic finale. There's a lot to like about this film, especially its clear empathy for the characters and some stylishly choreographed dance scenes, but it's hard not to wish Ayouch had punched up his plot the way the students punch up their rhymes. To borrow a songwriting term, too much of *Casablanca Beats* doesn't quite scan."

Nick Levine, *NME*, 29<sup>th</sup> April, 2022.