



FILM REVIEW: Divines (Benyamina, 2016): France

Description



AFIFEST 2016 presented by Audi.

Divines is the first feature length film by self-taught director

Houda Benyamina. Benyamina, Actress Oulaya Amamra, and *Divines* were AFIFEST 2016 winners of the New Auteurs Audience Award, the Breakthrough Audience Award and a Special Jury Mention for Acting.

The film opens in surreal fashion with an out of focus frame containing a smoke and fog-like effect reminiscent of a meditation and indicative of the filmmaker's use of dream logic.

Quickly, homage is made to Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*, with lead character, Dounia, played exquisitely by Oulaya Amamra, standing in front of a mirror pretending to fire a pistol while asking, "You looking at me?" Later in the film another homage to Scorsese is made from his early work, *Mean Streets*, with Dounia on her knees in the middle of the street pleading with God.



And, without too much adieu, Benyamina quickly takes us into the inner world of her lead character, Dounia. In a sacred space Dounia sneaks voyeuristically in a low-key lit, high-angle omniscient shot looking down on a theater stage during an audition. She likes what she sees in the form of Djigui, a dancer with moves and passion, played by Kevin Mishel.

A transition is made to a rambunctious classroom. Soon, Dounia is arguing with hyper intensity as Dounia questions her teacher's values and choice of vocation. The moment culminates with Dounia quitting school vowing to "show them." Her vocation is to make money.

Another transition is made to a slow motion sequence in a darkly lit dance club playing diegetic music from a singing disc jockey. Here we see Dounia's troubled mother inebriated and looking for love in all the wrong places. *Divines* for Dounia's mother.



Before long, Dounia witnesses a drug stash in the

back of the theater. Dounia seizes the moment and takes the stash to a local dealer with her best friend, Maimouna, an Iman's daughter, played by Deborah Lukumuena. The circle is complete as the drug dealer, Rebecca, played handsomely by Jisca Kalvanda, rounds out a strong cast of mostly female characters.

Throughout *Divines*, Dounia is searching for dignity. She lives in a Roma (gypsy) camp on the outskirts of Paris and is frequently called Bastard. She discovers drug dealing as a way to gain respect and power. Before long, however, Dounia finds out the price she must pay for her vocation might be too high.

In *Divines*, Benyamina illuminates an emerging Parisian subculture made up of colorful, fringe characters steeped in Islam highlighting their highly creative, unique, and authentic stories. In

furthering her artistic vision to democratize cinema, Benyamina formed a mutual assistance cinematic trade association, 1000 Visages (Faces).



Possibly quite coincidentally, American mythologist, Joseph Campbell's tome, "The Hero with a Thousand Faces," a seminal work on archetypal heroes and myths shared by world religions and traditions, contains the association's name in the book's title. However, I believe Benyamina has dissected the work drawing extensively from its teachings as we witness the transformation of Dounia.

For a first feature, Benyamina's *Divines* is polished. Costuming is realistic. The camera work and editing augment the film's reality well. The musical score sets the mood and aids in pacing. And the acting is quite good. Highly recommended.



Category

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