

DUNDEAD

Dundead Film Festival 2026: Roqia Programme notes by Carina NicHaouchine

The first time I went to Algeria, I was four years old. It was 2001. I got tear gas in my eye and learnt Kabyle rebel chants; everything was new and exciting. Four-year-old me did not understand that a brutal civil war was still ongoing, and had been since 1992.

My dad left Algeria for Italy in the mid-90s, and I feel I know embarrassingly little about this time. The period from 11 January 1992 to 8 February 2002 is known as Algeria's "Black Decade": a civil war fought between the Algerian government and various Islamist rebel groups.

A tragic consequence of a dark period in history is the reticence to speak of it once its immediate threat has passed. I have never sat down with my dad to fully understand why he left Algeria when he did. I've always assumed it was simply the pull of a European life and the opportunities he might find there, without considering the possibility of a more violent push away from his homeland.

Yanis Koussim's film *Roqia* begins in 1993 Algeria. Ahmed (Ali Namous) returns to his village following a car crash that has left him with amnesia. He remembers very little of his life before this moment - not his wife, nor his children. His youngest boy is terrified of his bandaged face, unsure if the man beneath it is even his father. Everything is disorientating: his relationships, the whispers he begins to hear at night, and the strange feeling that arises when he spends time with his supposed best friend.

The film moves to present-day Algeria, where there is a surge of horrific violence. An ageing raqi (a Muslim exorcist, played by Mostefa Djadjam) and his disciple (Akram Djeghim) attempt to exorcise an increasing number of possessed individuals in their town. But when the raqi is diagnosed with Alzheimer's, his disciple grows concerned by the old man's strange behaviours, fearing that something more sinister may be lurking beneath his master's mental decline.

Across these dual narratives, Ahmed is terrified of not remembering, while the raqi's disciple is terrified of what may be unleashed from the atrocities of the past.

Through chapterisation and jumps in time, the narrative deliberately disorients, leaving much obscured from the viewer. The experience mirrors Ahmed's own: with his bandaged face and limited grasp on recent memory, his perception slowly adjusts through soft, distorted camerawork. What emerges is a horror that both he and we had forgotten, one that he is soon to encounter once more.

Possession narratives in Christian or Catholic contexts often fall into familiar tropes: the possessed, the exorcist, speaking in tongues, the breaking of religious taboos, and levitation. Levitation aside, *Roqia* touches on all of these beats within an Islamic setting

and it is the first time I have encountered such a narrative within the context of a formerly colonised country, still grappling with religious extremism in a fragile post-independence landscape.

Across both timelines, characters experience amnesia and Alzheimer's - forms of unavoidable forgetting. Director Yanis Koussim, speaking at the Red Sea Film Festival, said: "*When you try to forget the trauma without fixing it, it will never leave.*" The film gestures toward a wider societal forgetting - the idea of collective memory, and of wounds that cannot be healed by time alone.

The film begins with the quote: "*The Messenger of Allah said: Satan flows through men as blood flows through his veins. I feared, therefore, that he might sow evil in your hearts.*" It ends with another: "*Violent fundamentalism is not Islam, but a distorted reading of its texts.*"

Within the complexities of this context, it is not simply a 'good versus evil' narrative. An exorcist, or raqi, cannot simply expel the demon and restore order.

Recently, the release of *The Stranger (L'Étranger)* by François Ozon has prompted renewed reflection on Albert Camus's original text. Ozon has been noted for acknowledging the colonial gaze present in Camus's novella - specifically, for naming the Arabs, especially the unnamed Arab who is killed. Though a very subtle intervention, in an adaptation that so carefully captures the protagonist Meursault's apathy, it nonetheless pushes against the Algerian erasure embedded in the original work.

When the demon to be exorcised is something that runs deep - a trauma passed down through generations - it becomes far harder to eradicate. It is a slippery, unknowable darkness that must be confronted, spoken of, and remembered.

So the next time I see my dad, I want to ask him why he left Algeria. I want to listen to him. And I want to remember.

Carina NicHaouchine is a Scottish-Algerian filmmaker and writer. Her first short documentary, *Ululation*, made with the Scottish Documentary Institute, explored her relationship to Algeria. She is currently in post-production for her first feature film, *Dungeon Masterhood* (a coming-of-age documentary - with dragons!), funded by Screen Scotland, and developing a second feature, *An Act Against Nature* (a personal exploration of queerness and Algeria). Her writing has been featured in *Soft Opening Gallery*, *Alchemy Experiment* and *Middleground Magazine*, and she compiled the first English translation of Algerian Amazigh folk stories: *Machaho: A Berber Folk Tale*.

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