

THE STRONGHOLD

Directed by Cédric Jimenez

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SYNOPSIS

Marseille's north suburbs hold the record of France's highest crime rate. Greg, Yass and Antoine's police brigade faces strong pressure from their bosses to improve their arrest and drug seizure stats. In this high-risk environment, where the law of the jungle reigns, it can often be hard to say who's the hunter and who's the prey. When assigned a high-profile operation, the team engages in a mission where moral and professional boundaries are pushed to their breaking point.

INTERVIEW WITH CEDRIC JIMENEZ

What inspired you to make this film?

In 2012, the scandal of the BAC [Anti-Crime Brigade] Nord affair broke out all over the press. It was difficult to escape it, especially for me being from Marseille. I quickly became interested in it, especially since I know the northern neighbourhoods well having grown up there. There was such a media show that I felt the need to know what had happened. How far had these cops taken the law into their own hands? But for that, it was necessary to have access to the police and to the files. That was obviously impossible. When we decided to work together, me and Hugo [Sélignac], my producer, I always had this affair in mind. It was then that he said to me, "Wait, I know someone in Marseille who could introduce us to the real cops involved." And that's what happened. I was able to meet the whole BAC Nord from that time, talk to these men. I started hearing things. I quickly called Hugo to tell him, "We have to make this film!"

But as early as 2012, did you feel there was material to make a film...

Yes, because we heard on the news reports of organised crime like "drug trafficking in an organised gang", "racketeering in an organised gang"... I know the northern neighbourhoods really well. It's not surprising that cops mess around there: they're areas abandoned by the state and which have specific codes... The police are no exception to this. But the media coverage of the affair seemed to me to be tinged with hypocrisy, with Manuel Valls declaring that he was going to "clean up the police!" and so on. It smacked of political exploitation: these cops were certainly not flawless, but how could the police force hide so much behind those accused? This intuition needed checking. So I met everyone, police officers as well as guys from the estates, waited for their tongues to loosen a bit, until I had enough information to say to myself I could make a film out of it. This question of responsibility, of the rupture within a system between those who say and those who do, is a powerful lever for fiction. It's from there that it becomes cinema.

Was it difficult to gain the police's trust?

No, that's what reassured me: I felt that they had nothing to hide. When the prosecutor dropped the main charges, there wasn't a word in the media, even though their arrest had been in the news for several days. Suddenly, they were happy to be heard and tell how they got there. They did some shit, it can't be denied, but the media coverage it received was disproportionate.

With such an inflammatory subject, how can you remain impartial?

That was the whole difficulty of the project. Not to condemn, exonerate or legitimise. What interested me here was to put forward the internal contradictions in the sense of general interest through the journey of these characters, who end up crushed by the system which had nonetheless formed them. Of course, these cops act under the aegis of the police, but ultimately they're closer to the guys from the neighbourhoods than to the political body which has never set foot there. I met a lot of residents for who these cops are part of everyday life: they rub shoulders, interact, learn to live together in a very specific context.

This is illustrated by this scene where Greg and his colleagues pick up a kid who insults them heavily, then relax the atmosphere by putting on the flashing light and driving Starsky and Hutch style. For a brief moment, there's almost a bond between them.

This scene, the real policeman who inspired Yass told me how it was. Every time they passed through the estate, this young one said to them "Hey guys, take me for a ride!" And thanks to this kid, they could enter that estate without being jeered. The BAC doesn't do social. They have harsh methods that I don't endorse. Here again, what interested me was to stand on a human scale to show the police system from within. A system that creates frustration, permanent tension in its own ranks, by not giving the police the means to meet the demands made

on them. And on the estate side, we create forgotten territories: frustration exists in exclusion, people are stuck in unworthy places where they have no access to anything. Every day in Marseille, a mother mourns her son and every day the men of the BAC must come back with numbers, ever higher numbers. With so much resentment accumulated on both sides, one spark is enough to ignite the powder.

What is a good cop, in the end?

Here, we're not thinking in terms of a good or a bad cop. THE STRONGHOLD isn't a pro or anti-cop film. And my role is not to replace that of justice. I just wanted to tell the story of three men and, through their profession and what they went through, expose the flaws in a system; a system where those at the bottom of the ladder are systematically sacrificed. A system which ignores its public servants and forgets the inhabitants of the estates.

How did you create the dynamic of the trio formed by Gilles, Karim and François?

I had the real police on hand, that helps (laughs). For the one played by Gilles, the police was his whole life. A real vocation. He didn't have a wife, he loved his independence. The youngest, portrayed by François, was a brawler for who the BAC was a bridge to the RAID [Search, Assistance, Intervention and Deterrence unit of the French National Police]. A white man himself from the northern neighbourhoods, who believed in the police. The third, played by Karim, he wanted to become an officer and start a family. Based on this information, I built these characters. I was lucky to have these actors, who hit it off right away.

These three police officers are more than colleagues: they're a family, of which Nora, Yass's wife played by Adèle Exarchopoulos, is somewhat the leader.

Precisely. They're alone. Alone facing the street, but also alone facing their hierarchy, which doesn't support them. They often have the feeling of being on their own. It creates strong bonds. So I also wanted to show the daily life of these men in terms of what brightness it can have. The scenes of lunch at Yass and Nora's for example. These stretches of simple happiness, with a daughter who gently pokes fun at their cowboy side.

In this virile universe of the police, you've managed to create powerful female characters.

For Nora, we once again relied on a real person, who was a valuable resource for Adèle. The Nora/Yass couple is based on a real couple. This woman was at the CIC [Intervention and Command Centre], at the Évêché [the central police station of Marseille]: it's the CIC which relays all the calls to the police emergency number to the patrols. I found it interesting that, in this somewhat macho world, it was a woman who tended to keep the guys in step. But the real Nora was like this: she has a lot of character. She had to do that to take what she took while her husband was in prison: raising young children on her own, with less pay; continuing to go to work while ignoring the looks of those who now saw her as the "wife of a crooked cop".

How did you build the character of the informer?

Unlike the other characters, this one was invented from a mix of several anecdotes: it didn't exist like it does in the film. This allowed a little more freedom on the choice of the actor, their gender, their age... And I said to myself that the relationship between Antoine and his informer would be even more interesting if seduction entered the equation. She can't afford to fall in love with a cop, he even less so with his informer, but you can tell there's a little more than affection between them. This increases the violence of the resolution tenfold.

How did Kenza prepare for the role?

Kenza's image has incredible grace, but I adapted the character to her more than the other way round. That said, in life she is what the character should be: an 18-year-old girl who comes from the northern neighbourhoods of Marseille and who, unlike me, still lives there. She had it all: the accent, the expressions – which she sometimes injected herself into the text... I'd seen SHÉHÉRAZADE, where she really shone. As soon as I made the informer a girl, I thought of her. I didn't meet anyone else, just like I didn't meet anyone other than Gilles, François or

Karim for their respective roles.

We immediately forget the actors in favour of their characters.

They all gave a lot. Gilles shaved his head, he stuck two small diamonds in his ear, to add a little touch of Marseillais bad taste. We don't often see him like that. François, I dyed him blond... He also wanted to add a touch of Marseillais accent. At first I wasn't sure because it's always risky and, as a Marseillais, I find that it rarely works. I told him, "Let's try and if it doesn't work I'll hear it anyway"... On the first take, I knew it worked. It really adds something to the character. And Karim prepared a lot physically by losing a lot of weight. The three of them also trained alongside real police officers who introduced them to gun handling, going on patrol – not during duty hours, but they showed them how to hide and so on. This involvement from the three contributed enormously to the truthfulness of the characters.

The scene where they take the estate by storm is impressive realism. How did you devise it?

I already knew the story, its sequence even before meeting the cops; it was actually told to me. It happened in La Castellane. The scene required very long preparation, then 8 days of shooting. All the extras are locals, who gave everything... There was a good vibe (laughs). It was caliente. But the guys were so happy to be there, among the actors... It was nice to see.

Were you able to shoot onsite, in La Castellane?

Unfortunately not. The residents agreed, but not the mayor, who feared that the film would convey a negative image of the estate. It's a shame, because for the young people, there was an experience to have, we would have given them a job during the shooting and so on. Suddenly, there were reports from an estate outside Marseille. The executive production, which is associated with the security company that handled the film, had unique access to these neighbourhoods. There was a little confidence-building work to do. The young people also had to become aware of the machine it was going to be, because they took plenty of clips, but there it was on a whole different scale...

The film has an energy close to that of THE FRENCH CONNECTION or DIRTY HARRY. Were they templates?

Not consciously, no. But the American films of the '70s, all this New Hollywood generation, it's a cinema that's dear to me, so it must come out despite myself.

There is this last part, all tense but still, which makes the film slide into a new intensity. How did you work on the dramatic construction of the part in prison?

What I wanted to deal with in this last part is the reversal of the situation. These cops spend their days together, on the move, on the lookout for any crime, any suspect to arrest. However, they end up, in the end, where their daily actions involve those they question: in prison. In the testimonies I heard, that's what especially stood out for me: these cops were applauded for their work, congratulated by their institution; the next day they're reduced to the rank of pariahs. What interested me was not how they should be punished or judged, but the dramatic rupture of the situation: this sudden paradigm shift which – apart from any value judgement – gives its dramatic scale to the story. Listening to them tell me about their incarceration, I realised that prison was the last place they thought they'd end up in. They had a very, very bad experience there. One of them (the character played by Gilles Lellouche), the strongest a priori, very quickly and violently cracked in detention. He took years to recover. The trauma was terrible. I wanted to stick to this reality. Once the uniform's off, their role disowned, the relationship to violence changes. This shift in the last part is also a tensioning of the trio of characters in a completely redefined way: these three guys who we see constantly together, united and on the move, suddenly find themselves locked up, separated, alone with themselves.

You mentioned that you came from the northern neighbourhoods: what recollection do you have?

A good recollection, frankly. I left them when I was 13, so over 30 years ago. The rules were different back then.

There was no Kalashnikov-style settling of scores. But these were already neighbourhoods you shouldn't go to. Relations with the police were already strained. I took a few beatings from the cops who were perpetually at war with the "big boys", as they call those who rule the streets in the estates. But I loved growing up there. An estate is nice when you're little, because it's closed: you know everyone, you go and eat at other people's places... And then there's always somewhere to play football or basketball. It's a pretty cool living space when you're a kid. Besides, you're from there, so it doesn't bug you. However, I certainly left at the right time. I grew up alone with my mother, who was a public servant and very keen on schooling. I did my sixth year in the northern neighbourhoods; my mother felt it was starting to become borderline, and that's when we moved downtown.

The way you film Marseille isn't "touristy", but rather sensory, even sensual: you capture the smells, the sounds, the colours, the light of the city. Isn't it the main character of the film?

I've already been told that about THE CONNECTION! (laughs) What can I say, I'm in love with my city. I still spend a lot of time there. But with THE STRONGHOLD, I wanted to show another side of the city: it's not the bucolic Marseille of small ports, it's a more of the people's Marseille, but just as beautiful. The flea market, for example, is a place I absolutely wanted to film, even though it was a logistical nightmare. Cigarette dealers, turtle traffickers, harissa sandwiches... This whole atmosphere is typical Marseille. With my production designer, who's also from Marseille, I worked a lot on translating this personality, to go in the direction of this folklore.

What did you discover with this film? How has it changed you?

Before doing THE STRONGHOLD, I was happy to criticise the police. Today, I still strongly condemn police violence, but I also know that the problem isn't limited to a few bad apples and I try to understand how, in a systemic way, it comes to this. I think it's up to the State to better prepare and support its police officers – at the educational level, at the salary level, at the technical level. There's a vicious circle to be transformed into a virtuous circle. These BAC cops are in constant contact with the inhabitants, that's precisely why I wanted to be in their point of view: they patrol during the day, so they see them all the time. They live together. The affair, ultimately, is secondary. It's just the vehicle that lets me show an obsolete and failed police system.

INTERVIEW WITH GILLES LELLOUCHE

After THE CONNECTION, was it a given to work again with Cédric Jimenez?

Yes, because we've remained fairly close: I follow the evolution of each of his projects closely, I appeared on HHhH. But I found that this had an interesting resonance with what we're experiencing today, and it was in his area of expertise: Marseille, it's his home. It's his culture, his codes. I knew he was going to blow me away again.

From a distance, the film, which espouses the point of view of three police officers from the BAC, could pass for "pro-cop": is this an aspect of the project that worried you?

Reading the screenplay swept away any worries I might have had. There are really two films in one, actually: on the one hand, there are these cops who are fighting to do what they believe is right; and then there is this political machinery which they all find themselves somewhat crushed in. And these are two completely different stories. For me, making a "pro-cop" film was out of the question, as was making an "anti-cop" film. It was a question of making a measured film.

But does our time, infatuated with sweeping judgements on social media, lend itself to a nuanced portrait?

On social media, we react off the bat, and what is true on Monday is no longer necessarily so on Tuesday. That's all quite bipolar. The advantage of art is that you put things in perspective: there's a gestation, a reflection. It's up to us artists, if at all, to take the heat out of debates, and keep a cool head as much as possible. Otherwise we only make scathing attacks, and more scathing attacks; there are good ones, and then very bad ones.

Is Greg, your character, a good cop or a bad cop?

He's a guy who has 20 years' experience and no longer understands why he's doing things. I think there's a great deal of misfortune and misunderstanding on the estates, as there is with cops – just look at the number of suicides in this profession. There aren't the good ones on one side, and the bad ones on the other, far from it. And personally, I'm happy to be able to defend something nuanced.

Greg has this terrible line: "The more I do this job, the less I do it"

To be honest, this is a line that I improvised. Because, after gathering numerous testimonies, we realise that the cops are cut off from the people they're supposed to protect: certain estates are closed off, there are areas that are lawless. For Greg, who's the type hungry for justice, this is unbearable. So after a while, he loses any concept of ideals. In the daily life of his profession, then in his relationship with his hierarchy. When he's suddenly given carte blanche to carry out a mission and he fulfils it, he feels alive again. But after congratulating him and closing its eyes to his methods, his hierarchy will abandon him for political reasons. Greg is an idealist who navigates a world without ideals and, ultimately, without morals.

How did you prepare for the role?

We were lucky to have access to the real police officers who inspired this story, which was valuable. These are guys who have been bruised, betrayed, so we had to sort it out, and leave aside a certain vehemence they might have towards the estates or institutions. I tried to translate as objectively as possible the reality of these cops, but also that of the guys I met on the estates who told me about the cowboy tactics of these police officers, and the liberties they were taking... What was funny was seeing big estate bosses talking to BAC cops like they were great friends they hadn't seen for a long time. Out of our 150 extras, there must have been 70 or 80 with electronic bracelets, but they were happy to work with us, happy to be considered. It was moving to see these guys who, at 7:30 in the morning, were ready to shoot, fully dressed, every day, during the three weeks it took to shoot the scene of the attack on the estate. They were super-involved, happy when the take was right. They felt useful, you know.

It's as if the divide between the people of the estate and those of the BAC disappeared in the best interests of this project.

Precisely. After all, cinema makes many people dream. It's a kind of magic wand.

We immediately believe in the trio of police officers you form with François Civil and Karim Leklou: how did you achieve this?

There are two aspects, actually. The technical aspect, which concerns the police officer's vocabulary and gestures. Even knowing how to carry a gun: they do it a certain way. So we trained with guys from the BAC, and fired all the weapons in the world – which, for me, a completely non-violent type, was still quite peculiar...

Regarding the almost childish bond between these three men, we had the good fortune to get along swimmingly, me and Karim and François, and that gave us that kind of intimacy it isn't always easy to have. The three of us didn't know each other, but we racked our brains during our weekend breaks, improvising among ourselves. For example, when our characters start talking about space, it's because we asked ourselves, "Hey, what can these guys say to each other when they find themselves hiding in a car waiting all night?" We wanted to get away from the usual clichés a little and bring in a bit of poetry and humour.

Each of the three police officers has a well-defined identity: Greg is the veteran. An ageing cop, and terribly alone.

In the beginning, my character was a sort of Marseillais playboy, a guy who kept stringing stories together like there was no tomorrow. I found it didn't help his distress. I really wanted to play a man who only lives for his job. A character to the bone. This man wakes up, and he's mechanical: he takes his shower, his proteins to make it through the day because he has an ageing body, and he goes off to fight. And when he returns home, no one's waiting for him: no wife, no children. Nothing. He's sacrificed everything for this job, so when this job sacrifices him, there's nothing left. It's lose-lose.

In the scene where he's confronted by the guy from the IGPN [Inspectorate-General of the National Police], where did you get Greg's anger from?

From injustice. He flirted with methods that weren't the right ones, but at the same time he always did his job sincerely. So I imagine that being in the dock, treated like a thug, must drive you crazy. His fury is that of the misunderstood, the childish anger of "But I swear I'm not lying to you!"

Are there films that you've watched or rewatched, on your own initiative or at Cédric Jimenez's request?

I wanted to see Denzel Washington in TRAINING DAY again, but that's it. The more time passes, the less I watch films to prepare for a role; on the contrary, I try to detach myself to avoid déjà vu.

The film reconnects a little with the spirit of the great French thrillers of the '70s, popular films but high quality, spectacular but with substance: what's your relationship to the genre?

I did a lot of thrillers ten or so years ago, bearing in mind I had parts in MESRINE, THE CONNECTION, THE LAST GANG as part of Gang des postiches [Wigs Gang], and then in Jean-Paul Rouve's film on Spaggiari [THE EASY WAY]. At one point, I distanced myself from this genre so as not to be totally identified with it. But it didn't seem to me that I'd done a thriller like THE STRONGHOLD. Besides, it was the human drama that interested me here, more than the genre. The trajectory of this character thirsty for justice, and who will suffer what he considers to be an injustice.

Still, THE STRONGHOLD recalls the heyday of the French thriller...

Yes, the films of Costa-Gavras, Melville, etc. But above all I had faith in Cédric Jimenez's rage. He's a guy with great gentleness and great intelligence, but also animated with great anger, and I knew that with this film he was going to be able to put it to good use, in some way.

Each film presents a particular challenge; what was it in THE STRONGHOLD?

Stay with the nuance, once again. Show that these cops could flirt with illegality and that at the same time they were animated by a real passion for their profession. Trying to walk on a tightrope between good and bad, right and wrong... We all have the temptation to play the heroes, or the bad boys, and I especially didn't want to fall into these roles.

Did your image of the police change through doing this film?

Not really, no. I've met a lot of police officers during my career, like I've met a lot of thugs, and it's always a bit the same, in the end. The ego is a great contemporary drama which leads, whatever camp you're in, to many errors. And to make matters worse, we're in an era where everyone wants to shine, exist at all costs, and that makes people lose their common sense. The police had jackets marked BAC Nord, FBI style. But when it comes to it, their motivations were the same as those of the estate guys: have my Golf GTI and my Rolex on the wrist, a table reserved in a nightclub... The more I make this kind of film, the more I realise that, cop or thug, the borderline is very thin.

A few words about your plans?

I reunited with Fred Cavayé for ADIEU MONSIEUR HAFFMANN, a historical film adapted from a play with Daniel Auteuil and Sara Giraudeau. I'm writing my next film as director. And in September I'm shooting GOLIATH, by Fred Tellier, with Pierre Niney and Emmanuelle Bercot, about the Monsanto affair. I'll play a lawyer, once again committed to justice.

INTERVIEW WITH FRANCOIS CIVIL

What attracted you to this project?

What first appealed to me was the screenplay I read. Some elements have changed and there's been a bit of a rewrite, but the film was there. Exciting, intelligent, relevant, racy. The character of Antoine is very far from who I am in real life, so I was very pleasantly surprised to learn that Cédric Jimenez wanted to meet me for this role. Then it was our meeting that finally confirmed my desire to participate in the project. Cédric's discourse, his vision of cinema and his rare energy are extremely contagious. The idea of making a hybrid film, an action film but with substance, with a real point of view on our system which is simultaneously a character film, which can navigate between scenes with subtle comedy and tragic and strong destinies... it was very exciting.

Is this your first time playing a policeman? Is it a genre you like, or not particularly?

I don't think THE STRONGHOLD fits into the "detective film" genre. Even if there is a thriller and suspense side, there's no real investigation, no story to unravel. Above all, it puts a lot of emphasis on the life of these police officers, their daily lives, their experiences in the field, their reports, their wanderings, their frustrations... In any case, that's how I approached the shoot, without projecting myself into a genre but trying to be as authentic as possible.

How did you prepare for the role?

From our first meeting, Cédric and I spoke about our desire to anchor the character of Antoine, even more so than the others, in Marseille. He himself lives on an estate, we had to feel that he came from there. I went to Marseille at least two months before the shoot to experience the city, to immerse myself, observe people, find my way of speaking, moving, dressing...

What was the contribution of the police officers who inspired the story? Did they serve as consultants?

Cédric created fictional characters who, after all, have little to do with the police officers who inspired the story. Meeting them and discussing with them particularly allowed us to better understand their daily work. What is a cop from the BAC in Marseille? What relationship do they have to action, inaction, to the city, to neighbourhoods, among each other, among brigades, to the hierarchy? What do they experience in a typical day, and what do they go home with at night? It's all these questions that they were able to give important answers to and imbue us with valuable anecdotes to enhance the roughness of the characters.

You play Antoine, the mad dog of the trio: how did you build the character? Was the bleached hair your idea? And the hound, Goldorak: who baptised him this way?

Antoine, he's a nervous type. An adrenaline junkie who lives for action. He acts on impulse, more than thinking, which makes him wild and dangerous at times. But we didn't want him to be just that. We wanted him to have depth. An exemplary code of honour and sincere and strong relations with the only people around him, namely his colleagues, Amel [his informer] and his dog. He's a young cop who, at the beginning of the story, strongly believes that he's useful for something. However, he comes up against a more complex reality.

To find all this, I also had to change physically. I put on muscle mass and sharpened myself to have the necessary explosiveness. When I arrived in Marseille I noticed that a lot of young guys had bleached hair and even before I spoke to Cédric about it, he himself asked me if I was up for it. Then we had to work on the accent. Even if it's very light in the film, I put a lot of pressure on myself and worked a lot with Cédric, who's from Marseille and who was in a way my safeguard to avoid excess or caricature on set.

Are there any films that you've watched or rewatched, at the director's request or on your own initiative, to get yourself in the spirit of the film?

No, not particularly.

How do you define your relationship with Amel, the informer who was a man in the story?

When Cédric had the idea to make Amel's character a young woman, I thought it was awesome. I imagined she was the only link I had left in the neighbourhood. A girl with I grew up with and always had an ambiguous relationship with. Full of love, but impossible. Like a little sister you want to help or protect at all costs. And Kenza Fortas brought so much spontaneity, authenticity and beauty to the role that it becomes extremely touching and makes my future choices and actions in the film all the harder.

Antoine is a very lonely guy: his family is the one he forms with his colleagues, right?

Precisely. He's a pretty lonely guy who lives through his job. And the closeness in a brigade is such that it often becomes a kind of family, of siblings, with all that entails in terms of confusion, reconciliations, jokes, love, respect, sharing, common goals...

We immediately believe in the unity you form with Gilles and Karim: how did you reach this degree of complicity?

Gilles and Karim are ultra-talented and inspired actors, and they also have the quality of being extremely generous. It's hard to pinpoint exactly why people like each other, but with them it was immediate. It made the work fluid and permanent. We never let go of our characters, nor the story. Cédric created an environment very conducive to suggestions, which means that the script is always in motion. It's a raw material that we transform in listening to each other. Working like this is idyllic.

What was the hardest part about this shoot? The "physical" side of the role? The fact that the film is based on real events?

Honestly, it was all fun! The tense scenes of the film that take place on the estates were, in reality, days of communion between the film crew and the neighbourhood extras, where everyone gave their all! It was beautiful. No, apart from a small contraction in the thigh after a badly warmed-up sprint... what a pleasure it was!

Did your image of the police change through making this film?

When you approach a film where your character's profession is central, you obviously learn a lot about it. We come out with a more precise feeling of what it means to be a cop, in the BAC, in Marseille. We realise that the real is always more complex than the a priori we might have. But the film is a reflection on the entire system that surrounds the police in the field. Hierarchy, instrumentalisation, politics, this is what will play on the destiny of our characters.

INTERVIEW WITH KARIM LEKLOU

What attracted you to this project?

The meeting with Cédric, to start with. You feel that he's very precise on his subject and that he has a real desire for cinema. He's very instinctive, very generous and has real breadth in his mise en scène. I found his project ambitious in terms of purpose and casting. The screenplay ended up convincing me: I liked the idea of making an action film with substance. An action film "à la française"...

What do you mean by that?

I was happy to take part in an action film that really fit into French society... There, we're not in a Manichean thing of good and bad, and the action doesn't run idle: it's at the service of a reflection on French society, and on our era. The non-personalisation of networks in the film through specific characters was a nice thing, as if it wasn't a problem of person but a much larger and more complex problem to deal with.

The film has empathy for all its characters...

Yes, for the police officers, who have to make bad decisions to achieve results, but also for the inhabitants of neighbourhoods who are victims of the networks. In the end, we have the impression of a territory abandoned on all sides: inhabitants or cops, everyone is left on the sidelines.

Has the image you had of the police changed through making the film?

No, because I've learnt through my profession to tell myself it's necessary to find a character's voice, and not to succumb to the temptation to make a generic judgment on any profession or category of people whatsoever. On the other hand, the film made me think about the political use this BAC Nord of Marseille scandal was put to. We ask the police to always get higher numbers, but does the public service have a vocation to do more? The film asks questions, it doesn't offer a moralistic judgement.

The policeman you play is also a young father, which weighs on his approach to the job, his relationship to danger and risk. How did you work on this aspect of the character?

The human dimension of these three characters interested me a lot: everyday scenes, scenes of eating. I didn't want to make my character too idealistic. Hence this improvised scene where he lashes out and where there is perhaps some form of frustration and excessive authority expressed. But it's true that I wanted him to be a rational person, ambitious within the police force. The field isn't very fulfilling for him. He has to go through it, but he can see himself passing through the ranks. He's a straight type: whether in his job or his family, he tries to stay the course. And I found it interesting that a guy like that, structured, without problems, slides towards the illegal.

His family is a bit like the family of all three, isn't it?

Yes, they are one.

How did you create this bond that unites them?

With Gilles, François, Adèle, it was easy because they're actors who have zero ego and are continuous sources of suggestions. They are ultra-generous actors, who had only one thing in mind: the film's best interests. I really enjoyed acting alongside them. The scene where we start talking about space, for example, was an improvisation that arose from a discussion outside of the shoot. The idea was to humanise our characters and go a bit beyond the scope of their function.

Does Cédric Jimenez leave much room for improvisation?

Yes, Cédric is someone it's very easy to discuss with, and we found the truth of the scenes on set. He has no advance judgement of what the scene should be. At the same time, he never loses track of what he wants to say. But these improvisations were also possible thanks to the cinematographer Laurent Tanguy: with him there are no marks, you move as much as you want. He's completely in tune with the game, and knew how to create a freedom of movement which was very beneficial for the film.

You filmed on location, in the estates of the northern neighbourhoods of Marseille: were you ever afraid?

No, never. We were always well received, and the guys went all out for the film.

The violence the police face has all the same changed category: we're almost in urban guerrilla warfare.

Yes, but it's the whole of society that's more violent. It's not unique to the estates. It was important to me not to tell everything and no matter what about the estates, and I like the fact that the film makes the difference between estates and drug trafficking networks. The inhabitants of neighbourhoods also suffer these terrible realities linked to the networks.

Between shadow and light, the film finds a fairly miraculous point of balance...

I think it's due to the way Cédric [Jimenez] films his city: these colours, this sun, it makes the image resonate. And then the darkness of the subject is interspersed with real moments of comedy, of lightness. The female characters add a lot to the film. What I like among other things with the character of Adèle, who plays my wife, is that she's a strong woman, a cop herself. In the meal scene, for example, we get the impression that she's the godfather (laughs). And those facing her become kids. Same thing with the character of Kenza [Fortas]: I find it interesting that the character of the informer is a girl. It's based on real events, but it's the kind of thing you rarely see on screen. And it's not just to look pretty: the relationship she has with the character of François [Civil] is super-beautiful, ambiguous. It brings modernity back to the subject, and always this idea that we are with human beings, with their qualities and their faults.

Of the three policemen who inspired the story, the one you play is the only one who stayed in the police force...

Yeah, he joins the union, because he's a justice-loving guy. He defends his values, and his commitment will be translated differently but continue despite everything.

What are your plans?

THE STRONGHOLD and its release!

INTERVIEW WITH ADELE EXARCHOPOULOS

What did you know about the BAC Nord scandal in Marseille before joining the film?

Nothing. I knew absolutely nothing about this affair before I opened the script.

What attracted you to this project?

I love and share the anger of the film. Cédric looks at people who have been abandoned. In the northern neighbourhoods of Marseille, as Kenza [Fortas] says in the trailer, "There are no more rules. There are no more cops, there's no more politics, there's no one left." The film denounces the hypocrisy of the police hierarchy, very happy for the "cowboys" to do the dirty work but which then feigns offence. Above all, I like the way Cédric looks at his characters. Those scenes where the guys from the BAC are in the car talking about mundane things, that's the aspect of the film I prefer. You inevitably arrive in a profession with illusions, especially with this profession where you can have a strong enough ideal of justice, and in the end you're eating a Filet-O-Fish waiting for an alert.

The film is not a simple thriller...

No, because Cédric manages to capture all these little things that are also the reality of this profession. All these everyday moments, these scenes at McDonald's, in the car or at the market, which don't necessarily take the plot forward but really reveal the characters. Personally, one of the scenes that upset me the most is when the character of Gilles says "I'm tired", after having accomplished the mission entrusted to them, and where you feel how worn out the man is. The moment François asks where his dog is. The moment when Karim asks to have his head shaved in prison, in order to be able to communicate with François. As an actress, I find that these seemingly fairly simple scenes, these scenes where there isn't necessarily anything at stake, are the hardest thing to do.

Karim Leklou says that in the meal scene we have the impression that you're the Godfather, not one of the three guys...

It's true that she's a bit of a "she-wolf", Nora. A she-wolf, she looks after her horde, defends her young... But it's not just my doing, it was already written like that in the script. What I like about the four of them is that they tell each other things. That's what creates a family for me: not being afraid to tear each other to pieces. Nora's in this relationship with these three men: she tells them the truth. Perhaps that's what gives her that "Godfather" side, more than the way she speaks or the fact that she knows how to grill. She isn't fooled for a single second by their macho side. Already because she's a fairly lucid person, but also because, through her role at the CIC [Information and Command Centre, which receives police emergency number calls], she observes them behind her screens. And then I think that, cop or not, we're all in a form of posturing, and even more so when wearing a uniform. Even more so when you have a job that can be seen as heroic. Even more so when we say to ourselves: "Hey, I'm going to be an actor of justice and peace".

What challenge did you have in finding your place in the face of such a close-knit male trio?

From the start, after reading the screenplay and talking to Cédric, I called Karim, who I knew well having already made two films with him [ORPHELINE (2017) and LES ANARCHISTES (2014)]. I was happy, because we had exactly the same vision of the Nora/Yass couple, and it was something we don't often see in the cinema. In general, couples are soulmates, quite passionate characters, or conversely people who are bored in their relationship. Whereas there we feel that there's a real affection between Nora and Yass – I was going to say friendship: we feel that they've grown up together and that they have no secrets from one another. The passion that there may have been turned into something even stronger, you just have to know how to accept it.

What was the real Nora like, the policewoman who inspired your character? Did you talk to her a lot? Is she

still in the police force?

Yes, she's still doing her job, but differently. They're no longer in Marseille, her and her husband. I met her several times, and spoke with her a lot about how she'd experienced this affair, on the outskirts. It was no less hard for her, with very small children too... She lost some illusions in the battle, of course, but there's still someone bright there.

Is it more pressure playing a real person? Working from real-life facts?

It all depends on the scenarios and the degree of authenticity: to what extent are we inspired by reality? I suppose when you do a biopic, you have this duty, this responsibility, but you also have to free yourself from it because sometimes reality is more incredible than fiction.

How did the filming go on location, on the estates of Marseille?

I didn't shoot on the estates, my character doesn't work in the field. But what I liked on seeing the film is that you can feel that Cédric's a local. There's a great deal of benevolence in his way of filming the city, he doesn't dwell on sordid reality. Through his eyes, we feel that we're dealing with people who are doing what they can. On both sides, moreover: as much among the cops as among the young people of the estate. For me, Cédric is the mayor of Marseille!

What are your plans?

I'm finishing the first feature film by Emmanuel Marre, CARPE DIEM, the screenwriter of THOSE WHO WORK. It's a very original way of working in the sense that there's no costumes, makeup, hairstyle, no text... It's a bit dizzying, but I love it! There's also MANDIBLES, the film by Quentin Dupieux, which will come out on 18 November. After that, I'm going to shoot the new film by Léa Mysius, who directed AVA.

INTERVIEW WITH KENZA FORTAS

What was your reaction to reading the screenplay for THE STRONGHOLD?

I haven't read it. I never read the entire script, just the parts involving my character. I knew nothing about the continuity of the film. That way, I let myself be surprised.

In the collective unconscious, the informer is the balance. The traitor. Did you hesitate in accepting the role of Amel?

No. I was shocked when I got this offer, because that's the kind of role you associate with a man. It might be the first time we've seen a female informer in a film, right? But rightly, I found it good to show something else to the public. And then there are as many girls as there are guys in the neighbourhoods. Why wouldn't they talk too?

Why is Amel talking with Antoine, when it comes down to it?

Quite simply, because she's fed up with everything that's happening in the neighbourhood. The deal, the violence... She'd like it to stop. And then, of course, because she has no means and for her it's easy money, even if there is the fear of reprisals.

We feel that there's a lot of affection between her and Antoine, maybe even a little more...

Yes, she considers him a big brother, she gave him her confidence, they created a strong bond of friendship. I think if it had been someone else, maybe she wouldn't have spoken.

They look like two children together, a bit like the pair you formed with Dylan Robert in SHÉHÉRAZADE.

Yes, that's true. I hadn't thought about that.

You have a great chemistry with François Civil.

It's the first time we'd met, but we really hit it off. Frankly, it went without a hitch.

Cédric Jimenez says that it's the character who had to adapt to you, and not the other way round...

(Laughs) I'm pretty wild, that's true. I've settled down a bit with age, but when I was younger I really was a little demon. I think you sense that on camera.

A little demon, you mean?

I don't know how to explain it... In SHÉHÉRAZADE, I was young, I was 16, I wasn't structured. But I've grown up since then, and I'm better at playing by the rules.

Like SHÉHÉRAZADE, THE STRONGHOLD takes place in the northern neighbourhoods of Marseille, where you come from. Is it important for you to show these neighbourhoods in cinema?

Yes, every time I have to shoot a film where I'm from, whether I'm an informer or a prostitute, I'm proud to represent my city.

Is it easy still living around the estates, now that you're well-known?

They look at me a bit like the "actress", the "star", but that's OK because it's my home. I was there before I started this job, so there you go, they still see me the same.

Was it difficult growing up in the northern neighbourhoods of Marseille?

Yes and no. I had my teenage crisis, from 14 to 16, but like everyone else, actually. You know, dating, all that... But afterwards, I managed to broaden my horizons, see other people, get to know other things... Having said

that, I think it's more difficult living in a neighbourhood for a boy than for a girl.

What do you mean?

I think that for the boys there's more of a temptation to go dealing, go stealing, all that.

How did cinema come into your life?

Cinema came out of nowhere! It wasn't in my plans at all, I didn't see myself doing that in life, not at all. I was in foster care, I wanted to pass my CAP Petite Enfance [Early Childhood Educational Accompaniment diploma]. It was my mother who sent pictures of me, after being approached in the street by a casting director who was looking for someone for the role of the mother in SHÉHÉRAZADE. A week later, I got a call from the casting director, but I took it as a joke. I said "Go and tell your lies elsewhere, I don't have time for that". But they pestered me, so I went. It all started from there. But you know, when I did SHÉHÉRAZADE, I didn't think it was going to get so big.

What are your plans?

I'm shooting a little thing in the "Validé" series broadcasted on CANAL+.

Your journey is like a fairy tale. Have you got used to it or do you still find it hard to believe?

To be honest, I never thought it was a fairy tale. Even at the time of the César Awards, I kept my feet on the ground. All that hasn't changed me. Except that I swear less. (laughs)

CEDRIC JIMENEZ

Cédric Jimenez is a French director and screenwriter born in Marseille. After several years spent in New York, followed by years in London, he began his film career in Paris in 2003 as an independent producer. Between 2006 and 2009 he produced films such as SCORPION by Julien SERI or EDEN LOG by Franck VESTIEL who was selected in several festivals (Toronto, Austin, Sitges etc...).

In 2011, he directed and produced "PARIS UNDER WATCH". This thriller, co-written with Audrey DIWAN, met with success and toured in genre festivals (Beaunes, Cognac, or even Naples, where it received the prize for best film).

"THE CONNECTION" with Jean DUJARDIN and Gilles LELLOUCHE is his second feature film as a director. This thriller, which Cédric JIMENEZ were co-scripting with Audrey DIWAN, was produced by Ilan GOLDMAN, producer of, among others, "LA VIE EN ROSE" by Olivier DAHAN, "COLOMB" by Ridley SCOTT and "CASINO" by Martin SCORSESE. With this same producer, Ilan Goldman, Cédric Jimenez signed the adaptation (co-written with Audrey DIWAN and David FARR) of the historical novel by Laurent BINET "THE MAN WITH THE IRON HEART". This is an international co-production, shot in English with Jason CLARKE, Rosamund PIKE ...

In 2019, he shot in Marseille the feature film "THE STRONGHOLD", produced by CHI-FOU-MI Productions with in the great actors in the main parts like Gilles LELLOUCHE, François CIVIL, Karim LEKLOU and Adèle EXARCHOPOULOS.

DIRECTOR

2020	THE STRONGHOLD
2017	THE MAN WITH AN IRON HEART
2014	THE CONNECTION
2012	PARIS UNDER WATCH
2003	WHO'S THE BOSS: BOSS OF SCANDALZ STRATEGYZ

GILLES LELLOUCHE

Graduated of the Cours Florent, Gilles Lellouche began his career by multiplying supporting roles: THE HAMLET SISTERS (Abdelkrim Bahloul, 1998), WHAT I DID FOR LOVE (Jérôme Cornuau, 1998) and MY WIFE IS AN ACTRESS (Yvan Attal, 2001). Guillaume Canet directed him in WHATEVER YOU SAY (2002) and TELL NO ONE (2006). Gilles Lellouche did the same, giving him the leading role of his first feature film NARCO (2004).

Since 2005, the actor-filmmaker became a regular in romantic comedies, playing the loser in LOVE IS IN THE AIR (Rémi Bezançon, 2005), a role for which he received the 2006 César of the Most Promising Actor. He also likes to play less friendly characters as in MY PLACE IN THE SUN (Eric de Montalier, 2007), ROOM OF DEATH (Alfred Lot, 2007) and PARIS (Cédric Klapisch, 2008).

In 2010, he played the lead role in the thriller TRADER GAME (Fabrice Genestal), portraying an unscrupulous trader alongside Michael Madsen, Charles Berling and Vahina Giocante. Gilles Lellouche became one of the most sought-after actors in French cinema. The actor passed both in front of and behind the camera alongside five other filmmakers (including Jean Dujardin and Fred Cavayé) in THE PLAYERS. He then embodied a double agent in the thriller THE INFORMANT (Julien Leclercq) and a mob boss in THE CONNECTION (Cédric Jimenez, 2014).

More recently, he played in comedies such as THE JEWS (Yvan Attal, 2016), ROCK'N ROLL (Guillaume Canet, 2017), SOUS LE MEME TOIT (Dominique Farrugia, 2017) and in C'EST LA VIE (Olivier Nakache, Eric Toledano, 2017), a role for which he received a César nomination for Best Supporting Actor in 2018. A nomination he already had for his performance in LITTLE WHITE LIES (Guillaume Canet, 2010). He also appeared in darker films, such as the historical thriller THE MAN WITH THE IRON HEART (Cédric Jimenez, 2017).

In 2019, Gilles were to be find in the films IN SAFE HANDS (Jeanne Herry), LITTLE WHITE LIES 2 (Guillaume Canet) and PARIS PIGALLE (Cédric Anger).

This year, Gilles Lellouche is again to disvoer in the French cinemas playing a police officer in Cédric Jimenez new film THE STRONGHOLD.

2020	THE STRONGHOLD	Cédric Jimenez
2019	LITTLE WHITE LIES 2 NEW BIZ IN THE HOOD	Guillaume Canet Mohamed Hamidi
2018	PARIS PIGALLE IN SAFE HANDS	Cédric Anger Jeanny Herry
2017	DIVING C'EST LA VIE THE MAN WITH AN IRON HEART ROCK N' ROLL SOUS LE MEME TOIT	Mélanie Laurent O. Nakache & E.Toledano Cédric Jimenez Guillaume Canet Dominique Farrugia
2016	THE JEWS	Yvan Attal
2015	SKY FAMILIES LES GORILLES	Fabienne Berthaud Jean-Paul Rappeneau Tristan Aurouet

KARIM LEKLOU

Karim Leklou appeared for the first time in the cinema in the film A PROPHET by Jacques Audiard in 2009.

Between 2011 and 2014, he pursued the path of authorial cinema by establishing his presence in Bouli Lanners' film THE GIANTS, Radu Mihaileanu's film THE SOURCE, and Rebecca Zlotowski's for GRAND CENTRAL.

In 2012, his role in Marie Monge's shortfilm MARSEILLE BY NIGHT allowed him to get awarded the Male Actor's Prize at the Premiers Plans d'Angers festival and the Male Actor's Prize at the Côté Court festival in Pantin.

In 2015, his main role in HEAT WAVE by Raphaël Jacoulot marked a first turning point in his career. He reunites with Tahar Rahim (his partner in A PROPHET) for THE ANARCHISTS of Elie Wajeman, HEAL THE LIVING by Katell Quillévéré and PLAYERS of Marie Monge.

In 2018, Karim Leklou's career became clear. With THE WORLD IS YOURS, the explosive comedy by Romain Gavras acclaimed by critics, he became known to the general public and received the Swann d'Or for male revelation at the Cabourg Festival. He was also nominated for the César for Best Male Hope. The same year, he was one of the protagonists of the HIPPOCRATES series by Thomas Lilti, alongside Louise Bourgoïn and Alice Belaïdi.

Soon, he will appear in THE STRONGHOLD, the police/action movie by Cédric Jimenez, with François Civil and Gilles Lellouche. Then he will be in Season 2 of HIPPOCRATES, before forming a trio of soldiers with Leïla Bekhti and Anthony Bajon in Giovanni Aloi's first feature film, THE THIRD WAR.

2020	THE STRONGHOLD THE THIRD WAR	Cédric Jimenez Giovanni Aloi
2018	THE WORLD IS YOURS PLAYERS	Romain Gavras Marie Monge
2017	IF YOU SAW HIS HEART	Joan Chemla
2016	ORPHAN HEAL THE LIVING TORIL THE STOPOVER	Arnaud des Pallières Katell Quillévéré Laurent Teyssier D. & M. Coulin
2015	HEAT WAVE THE ANARCHISTS SOUS X	Raphael Jacoulot Elie Wajemen Jean-Michel Correia
2014	YOUNG TIGER	Cyprien Vial
2013	GRAND CENTRAL 11.6	Rebecca Zlotowski Philippe Godeau

FRANCOIS CIVIL

Since 2016 and the reveal of this talent to the grand public in the film FIVE, François Civil has become a an actor who takes headline after headline in the media. He has a series of leading roles: in BACK TU BURGUNDY by Cédric Klapisch and the fim SOMEONE SOMEWHERE, also by Klapisch, in 2019. THE WOLF’S CALL by Antonin Baudry, WHO YOU THINK I AM by Safy Nebbou and LOVE AT SECOND SIGHT by Hugo Gélin.

In 2020, he will star in Cédric Jimenez's new film THE STRONGHOLD premering in French cinemas in December.

2020	THE STRONGHOLD	Cédric Jimenez
2019	THE WOLF’S CALL SOMEONE SOMEWHERE	Antonin Baudry Cédric Klapisch
2018	LOVE AT SECOND SIGHT WHO YOU THINK I AM	Hugo Gélin Safy Nebbou
2016	BURN OUT	Yann Gozlan
2015	BACK TO BURGUNDY FIVE	Cédric Klapisch Igor Gotesman
2014	MADE IN FRANCE	Nicolas Boukhrief
2013	AS ABOVE SO BELOW FONZY FRANK IT BOY MACADAM BABY	John Erick Dowdle Isabelle Doval Lenny Abrahamson David Moreau Patrick Bossard
2012	THE STROLLER STRATEGY	Clément Michel
2011	SPONSORING BORDERLINE	Malgorzata Szumowska Alexandre Coffre
2010	15 LADS BUS PALLADIUM	Romain Cogitore Christopher Thompson

KENZA FORTAS

Kenza Fortas was born in southern France in 2001. Coming from a lower-class family, she grew up alongside her mother. Kenza Fortas was spotted by the director Jean-Bernard Marlin as he was searching for two teenagers to play in the film SHEHERAZADE. After six months of casting, the director Jean-Bernard Marlin and the team selected the young woman to play the main female part in the movie. On February 22nd, 2019, Kenza Fortas won the César for best female hope for her role played in SHEHERAZADE.

In 2020, Kenza plays the part of Jennifer in the film by the director Marion Laine INTO THE WORLD. Later the same year, in December 2020 Kenza Fortas will be to discover again in the French cinemas in Cédric Jimenez' new film THE STRONGHOLD, where she will be playing a messenger with inside knowledge from the difficult districts of Marseille.

2020	THE STRONGHOLD INTO THE WORLD	Cédric Jimenez Marion Laine
2018	SHEHERAZADE	Jean-Bernard Marlin

ADELE EXARCHOPOULOS

Adèle Exarchopoulos appeared for the first time in Jane Birkin's movie Boxes, in 2006. Then she made a series of noticeable appearances, such as in Rose Bosch's La Rafle (2010).

She was revealed to the general public with BLUE IS THE WARMEST COLOR by Abdellatif Kechiche. The success of the film made her famous all over the world. Along with the director and his partner Léa Seydoux, she received the Palme d'Or at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival, then the César for Best Female Hope. Since then, she has confirmed her talent with original projects, such as INSECURE by Marianne Tardieu (2014) or THE ANARCHISTE by Elie Wajeman (2015). She returned to Cannes in 2019 to present the psychological drama SIBYL by Justine Triet. In 2020, she will be alongside François Civil and Gilles Lellouche in Cédric Jimenez's latest film "THE STRONGHOLD".

2020	THE STRONGHOLD CARPE DIEM MANDIBULES	Cédric Jimenez Emmanuel Marre Quentin Dupieux
2019	FORTE SIBYL	Katia Lewkowicz Justine Triet
2018	THE WHITE CROW REVENIR	Ralph Fiennes Jessica Palud
2017	LE FIDELE	Michael R. Roskam
2016	ORPHAN THE LAST FACE	Arnaud des Pallières Sean Penn
2015	DOWN BY LOVE	Pierre Godeau
2014	THE ANARCHISTS INSECURE JOURNEY TO THE MOTHER	Elie Wajeman Marianne Tardieu Mikhaïl Kosyrev-Neterov
2013	I USED TO BE DARKER	Matthew Porterfield
2012	PIECES OF ME	Nolwenn Lemesle
2010	CARRE BLANC TURK'S HEAD	Jean-Baptiste Leonetti Pascal Elbé
2009	THE ROUND UP	Rose Bosch