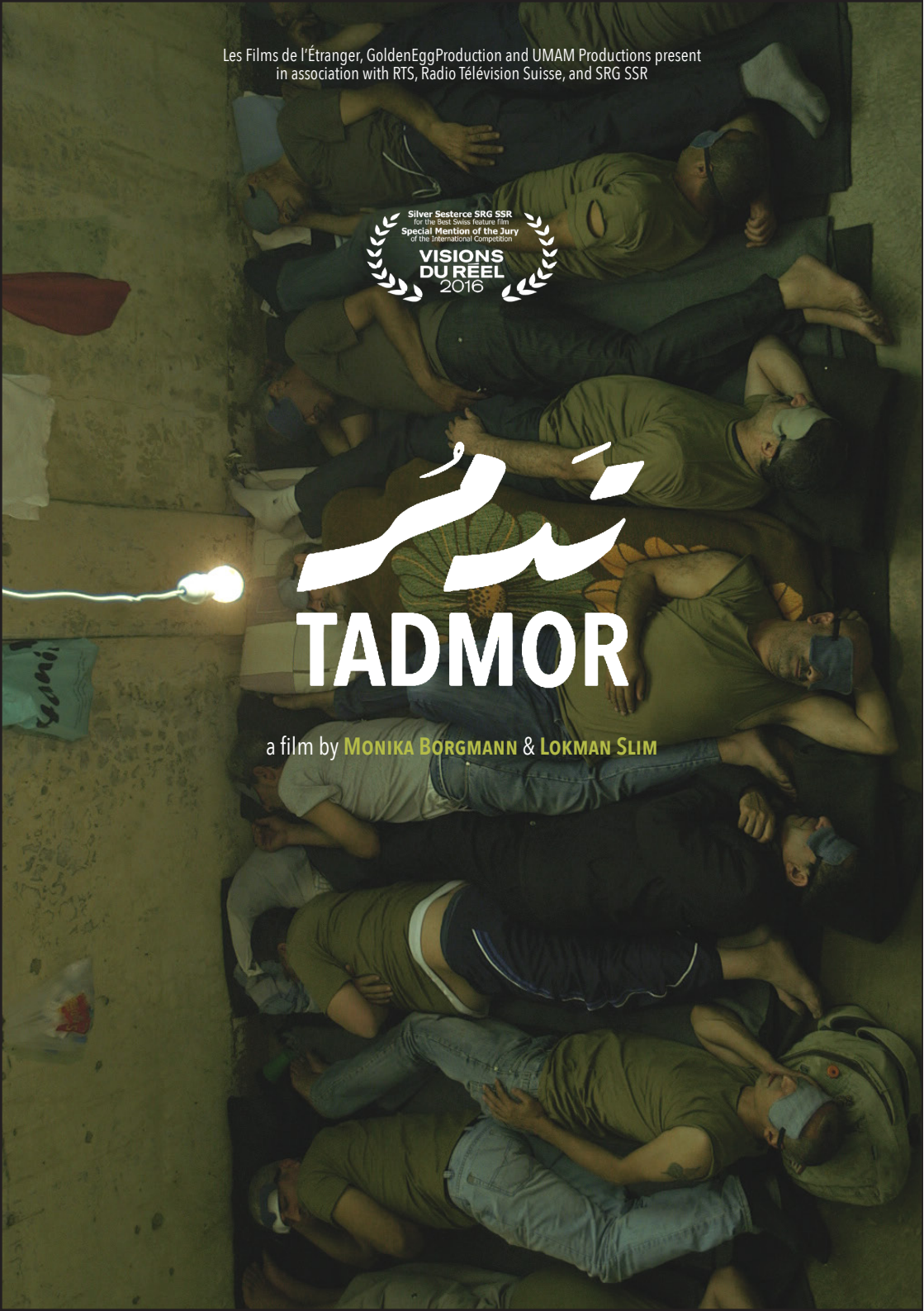
Les Films de l'Étranger, GoldenEggProduction and UMAM Productions present
in association with RTS, Radio Télévision Suisse, and SRG SSR
Silver Sesterce SRG SSR
for the Best Swiss feature film
Special Mention of the Jury
of the International Competition
VISIONS DU RÉEL 2016
تدمر
TADMOR
a film by MONIKA BORGMANN & LOKMAN SLIM

Les Films de l'Étranger, GoldenEggProduction and UMAM Productions present
in association with RTS, Radio Télévision Suisse, and SRG SSR

تدمر
TADMOR

a film by **Monika Borgmann** & **Lokman Slim**

France, Lebanon, Switzerland, Qatar, United Arab Emirates
2016 | 103 min | colour | 1:1.85 | 2K | mix 5.1 | original version: Arabic

press kit available on www.tadmor-themovie.com

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TadmorMovie

SYNOPSIS

Amidst the popular uprising against the Syrian regime that began in 2011, a group of former Lebanese detainees decides to break their long-held silence about the horrific years they spent imprisoned in Tadmor (Palmyra), one of the Assad regime's most dreadful prisons.
They decide to testify publicly about the systematic torture and humiliation they experienced. To reclaim and overcome this dark chapter in their lives, they rebuild Tadmor in an abandoned school near Beirut.
By playing the role of both «victim» and «victimizer,» they will relive their survival.

DIRECTORS' NOTE

When I was in Tadmor Prison, I thought my life had ended… Fear, sickness, defeat… Humiliation upon humiliation upon humiliation… Words cannot describe the brutality I experienced… Life had passed me by… But we returned from hell… Freedom is as precious as the soul… To the prisoners who are still suffering: May God get you out of there…

These were the words we heard in 2012, when we started our research for the film *Tadmor*. These were the words used to describe Tadmor Prison by a group of men who survived its horrors. Tadmor had just one purpose: the complete physical and psychological destruction of its inmates.

Ali. Saad. Moussa. Raymond. Moustafa. Rashid. Elias. Camille. Marwan. Jamal. Jamil. Yahya. Darwish. Ali. Jalal. Saeb. Houssein. Mohammad. Fouad. Ibrahim. Mahmoud. Ali. Sons, husbands, friends, fathers, lovers, all of them had rich lives before their arbitrary incarceration in Assad's Syrian prisons. All of them survived. Thousands of others did not…

How to make a film about such a carceral system and about the rawest of emotions, such as fear, terror, hate, disgust, shame, pain, weakness, helplessness, boredom, resistance, hope and strength? The answer came from them, the survivors themselves. In *Tadmor*, they guided us and we followed.

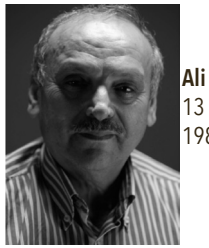
In an extraordinary endeavor of collaboration and trust, built on a years-long and enduring relationship, the men were ready to confront–together–their common past.

Words alone could not describe the cruelty of their detention. Words alone could not exorcise that horrendous past. Ultimately, the men chose to reenact it. They wanted to relive it.

Together, we searched for a place they could use to rebuild their isolation and collective cells. Together, we created the scenes they would reenact. Together, we prepared each phase in the filming.

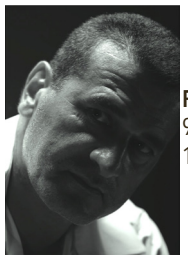
In *Tadmor*, twenty-two men recall their individual and collective stories of torture and survival. They speak for themselves, but also for those who are still trying to survive the same systematic torture and humiliation.

PROTAGONISTS

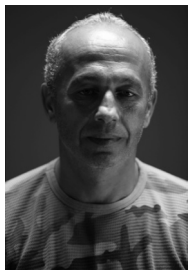


Ali Abou Dehn
13 years of incarceration
1987 - 2000

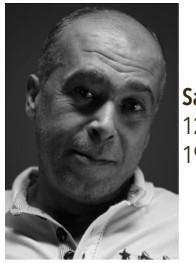
Raymond Bouban
12 years of incarceration
1986 - 1998



Rachid Mirhoum
9 years of incarceration
1988 - 1997

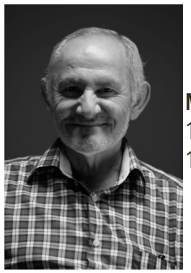


Moussa Saab
14 years of incarceration
1986 - 2000



Saadedine Saifeddine
12 years of incarceration
1986 - 1998

Elias Tanios
9 years of incarceration
1992 - 2001



Moustafa Shamseddine
12 years of incarceration
1986 - 1998

and

Jalal Abdelrahim
1986 – 2000 | 14 years

Darwish Abdallah Ahmad
1988 - 1992 | 4 years

Fouad Abou Ghader
1988 - 2000 | 12 years

Mahmoud Ahmad
1985 - 1988 | 3 years

Marwan Assaf
1987 – 1992 | 5 years

Camille Bawaridi
1994 – 2001 | 7 years

Houssein Daishoum
1985 – 1991 | 6 years

Jamil Dib
1993 – 2001 | 8 years

Sa'ib Hamoud
1988 – 1991 | 3 years

Ibrahim Harshi
1986 - 2000 | 14 years

Mahmoud Koja
1986 - 1992 | 6 years

Ali Qadri
1987 - 1998 | 11 years

Ali Shahin
1989 - 1992 | 3 years

Jamal Shahrani
1991 - 1998 | 7 years

Yahya Zahra
1986 – 1996 | 10 years

INTERVIEW

with Monika Borgmann & Lokman Slim

Serge Gordey : After doing *Massaker*, you now present *Tadmor*. Would you spell out your approach in each of these films and describe how the first film impacted the second one's thinking?

MB & LS : We conceived *Massaker* between 2001 and 2004, and the film premiered in 2005. For quite some time, many years in fact, we felt that we couldn't go further in elaborating on the topic of violence. Of course, we are not saying that *Massaker*–which portrays six perpetrators of the Sabra and Shatila massacre–provides a definitive answer to the question, "How does one become able to commit such crimes," but it offers several hints. It was also the question that guided our research for the film.

Then, in 2008, we met a group of Lebanese who had been detained for years in Syrian prisons. The more we listened to their stories of torture, humiliation and survival, the more obvious it became that we needed to make *Tadmor*, another film about extreme violence.

When we talk about the impact *Massaker* made on *Tadmor*, then we'd like to start with a quote from *Massaker*: "*There are 100 people. You kill the first against your will. With the second and the third, it's a bit easier. When you get to the fourth, you enjoy it. I mean, once you have killed the fifth you may as well kill the sixth. You don't mind it any more...*" Violence can be without borders. We knew that beforehand, but *Massaker* was another proof. But what is the source of the strength a victim must have to survive years of torture and humiliation? This was the question that guided us for *Tadmor*.

Regarding the cinematic approach we took, the interviews–in both films–were filmed in anonymous locations. Apart from our preference for that approach, we also had other reasons for filming each set of interviews the way we did. But while *Massaker* is composed only of interviews, *Tadmor* includes an additional major element, the reenacting or reliving of those key experiences.

The starting and ending points of both films center on "dealing with extreme violence in a political context." In *Tadmor*, like *Massaker*, we tried to solve a riddle that is–especially in this part of the world where violence is «exchanged» regularly–simply another part of the landscape. In *Massaker*, that riddle is about trying to understand how an ordinary "man on the street" can suddenly become the purveyor of unspeakable violence. In *Tadmor*, the riddle relates to understanding–among other things–how it becomes possible for that «man on the street» to overcome extreme humiliation and violence. Also in both cases, we arrive at the conclusion that only the availability of details can help solve either riddle. If *Massaker* influenced *Tadmor* at all, it is from the perspective that we can always dig deeper in any attempt we make to solve these riddles–which, unfortunately, are becoming far less exceptional.

SG: Can you explain why a pressing and very personal desire to voice their experience could only appear amongst your characters in the context of the insurrection movement in Syria?

MB & LS : As individuals, some of the film's protagonists have certainly spoken previously of their experiences. Specifically, we'd like to mention Ali Abou Dehn, who talked to the media immediately after his release in 2000. Without doubt, TV and Web-based coverage of the brutal repression that defined the initial uprising in Syria triggered many of the memories the men had worked so hard to forget. And since this film represents a collective experience, it goes well beyond talking alone. It offers each of the men who endured this savage experience the opportunity to express himself using any means he felt would get him closer to expressing his genuine emotions.

A quantitative reply to this question would be to remind everyone that the distance between Beirut and Damascus is only about 110 kilometers. Thus, for residents of one of those cities, it is common to hear and to be influenced by things taking place in the other. But there is certainly more to this than geography alone. It is important to recall that the most recent turning point in Lebanon's history was the 2005 withdrawal of Syrian forces that had been in place for 15 years supposedly helping the Lebanese authorities maintain «civil peace.» We also need to understand that the Lebanese uprising, which followed the 2005 assassination of Rafic Hariri and led directly to the internationally supported Syrian withdrawal, convinced many Lebanese that something would eventually change in Syria. In that sense, the Syrian uprising that began in 2011 seemed to fulfill the promise made in 2005.

SG: Dealing with such traumatic experiences in a film is a very daring endeavor. Isn't there a danger of an "apprenti sorcier" drive in such a film? How did you deal with the emotions and possible posttraumatic syndrome of your characters that might be reactivated by this experience?

MB & LS : That's certainly a legitimate question. The risk you describe is certainly real; however, we believe the strategy we used to mitigate that risk has been very effective. For instance, throughout the entire process, we consulted with psychotherapist Sabine Sayegh-Jodehl on the possible consequences of such an exercise. Equally important to the insight she gave us was the slow but steady confidence we built with our protagonists/partners in this film. That positive relationship ultimately led to a genuine partnership, without which it would have been impossible for us to complete the film. Rather than simply reenacting their past, we needed the men to feel real ownership of this film–and we think the outcome speaks for itself.

SG: Why do you feel a spectator should be subjected to such painful and horrific memories?

MB & LS : I'm not sure that the subject of this film is any less horrific or painful than the news we read daily on our smartphones or elsewhere. Stated otherwise, we are being subjected to abject horror on an almost daily basis. The difference between those «installments» of horror and those addressed in the film is that the installments somehow seem more acceptable than the large, immersive dose Tadmor delivers, which might seem unbearable–or even unbelievable–to some viewers. Honestly, we believe that the large dose administered by Tadmor, which some viewers may consider an overdose, is absolutely necessary to impart to our audiences the evil nature of the day-to-day horrors these men endured.

SG: To what extent is your film metaphoric? To what extent is it naturalistic?

MB & LS : When we began work on this film, we had no intention or desire to «label» the final product in any particular way. Because of that, we can't object to *Tadmor* being considered metaphoric, naturalistic or a mixture of both. At the same time, we certainly aren't insinuating that our approach to the film was "loose" or in any way indecisive. And while we didn't edit the different testimonies and reenactment scenes to ensure that they somehow achieved a single, overarching testimonial "tone," we understand that our choice may tend to indicate a rather metaphoric outcome. But from another perspective, since we did our best to avoid making cuts that might "neutralize" or "blend" the narration, we believe *Tadmor* can also reflect a naturalistic or even literal approach.

SG: There is presently in the documentary field a confrontation between observational and a staged approache: where is Tadmor in that confrontation?

MB & LS : The debate over observational versus staged approaches has filmmakers lining up on either side of the table to argue their positions. In our case, however, it seems appropriate to stress again the partnership that evolved between our protagonists and the crew. This partnership began in 2008/2009 and produced a number of advocacy outcomes. Among the more interesting examples was a live performance, *The German Chair*, conceived by the protagonists themselves and staged in Beirut and Germany. Even the text of that performance was written primarily by the protagonists. Although we provided technical assistance, we did our best to avoid intervening. Stated otherwise, the genesis of Tadmor was anything but random, so we are somewhat uneasy about being drawn into the «observational» vs. «staged» approach row. In our case, staging was not simply part of the narration, but it was also an important factor in this long-term complicity. We believe DoP Talal Khoury and second camera Rami Nihawi captured each of these strained moments exceptionally well. In fact, we were actually shocked when we saw some of the footage, especially the parts that center on the men reliving their experiences in the collective or solitary cells, and we can certainly say that the emotions shown are quite real.

SG: What is the nature of your common work?

MB & LS : We definitely come from very different backgrounds. Monika has extensive radio and writing experience while Lokman has long been involved in the field of writing and publishing. As we began working together–which was somewhat coincidental–once we completed *Massaker*, we tried to expand our shared interests by questioning issues such as violence and the so-called collective memory. We followed that path by establishing a Beirut-based NGO called *UMAM Documentation and Research*, through which we have questioned various aspects of Lebanon's war-loaded memory. Fortunately (and unfortunately), our concentration on Lebanon became a prototype in neighboring countries similarly afflicted with violence. Considering the many factors we described previously, Syria has also emerged as an integral part of our work. Realistically, our filmmaking (and other forms of expression) makes us feel as though, despite an initial lack of words, we were finally able to say precisely what needed to be said–and in a form that is far more physical than we ever imagined. Film, however, is neither «spontaneous» nor a form of natural expression. Rather, filmmaking demands of us everything we know about the subject. Consequently, the biggest challenge in making a film like Tadmor is ensuring that it imposes on us the physical need to scream–even through the voices of others.

SG: The political situation changed drastically in the Middle East since you started the production of this film (the balance of forces is different in Syria and in the whole region, the relations of the big powers towards the Syrian regime has evolved, Daech has appeared as a new player). How can this impact the reception of your film?

MB & LS : We can add even more to that scenario. The most recent exploit by the Assad regime–with the assistance of its allies–was the «liberation» of Tadmor (Palmyra) from ISIL (Daesh). Yet while people around the world have applauded that military victory in a variety of ways, very few realize that despite Tadmor being home to an exceptionally valuable world heritage site, it was also home to one of the most infamous prisons in Syria and the entire Middle East. We are thus forced to admit that what we are seeing today not only represents the collapse of the Arab Spring, but also the prevalence of a counterrevolution being justified by the need to fight terrorism. Apparently, terrorism is not generally recognized as being something of a by-product of the decades of injustice to which the Middle East has been subjected…with the blessing of the international community. Although *Tadmor* may be tantamount to a cry in the wilderness, it exemplifies a very physical cry going unheard in a very real wilderness.

(An interview by Serge Gordey - March 2016)

MONIKA BORGMANN & LOKMAN SLIM

Monika Borgmann - Born in Germany, she studied Arabic and Political Science in Bonn and Damascus. From 1990 to 2001, she worked in the Middle East and North Africa as a freelance journalist for German radio and "Die Zeit." BORGMANN holds dual German/Lebanese citizenship and is the author of Saïd Mekbel, une mort à la lettre (2008. Dar Al-Jadeed Publications, Lebanon and Téraède Éditions, France).

Lokman Slim - Born in Lebanon, he studied philosophy in Paris. After returning to Lebanon, he founded the Dar al-Jadeed publishing house, where he offered established, controversial and new writers opportunities to engage with the public. SLIM is an essayist and leading spokesman for the preservation of Lebanese history and advancement of its culture.

Borgmann and **Slim** began collaborating in 2001 when they co-directed the feature documentary ***Massaker*** (2004, 99 min.). The film was screened at more than sixty international film festivals and was released to the cinema in France and Greece in 2006. *Massaker* received seven awards, including the Fipresci Prize at the 2005 Berlinale.

Borgmann and **Slim** also co-founded UMAM Productions in 2001, an organization that has since co-produced a series of Lebanese documentaries.

While researching their work on *Massaker*, **Borgmann** and **Slim** realized that Lebanon had neither a central archive nor a national library. In response, they launched UMAM Documentation and Research in 2004, a Lebanese NGO that focuses on issues related to civil violence and the collective memory of the Lebanese civil war. UMAM D&R continues to collect, preserve and disseminate important and representative aspects of Lebanon's culture and history.

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	RAYAN OBEYDINE
	CHADI ROUKOZ
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SOUND EDITING	**BENJAMIN BENOIT**
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COLOR GRADING	**YOV MOOR**
SINGER	**AUDREY CHEN**
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	UMAM PRODUCTIONS
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