



# A CONVERSATION WITH KAMEL KRIFA

*Posted on June 1, 2020 by Grégoire Canlorbe*



*The Postil is very pleased to publish this conversation with Kamel Krifa, an actor, film producer, and trainer of Hollywood stars – including Jean-Claude Van Damme, Michelle Rodriguez, Eddie Griffin, Steven Seagal, and so many others. Krifa is Van Damme's longest collaborator and personal friend, acting alongside him in various movies. This conversation with [Grégoire Canlorbe](#) began in Paris, in July of 2017; it was resumed and completed in April of 2020.*

**Grégoire Canlorbe (GC):** In [Kickboxer IV](#), you gave flesh and soul to iconic villain Tong Po. Do you intend to return to the saga?



**Kamel Krifa (KK):** At the time I was offered a contract for five films to interpret the character of Tong Po. It was an interesting challenge, for my acting was essentially limited to the expression of my eyes and to contorting my mouth. In fact, I was asked to wear a mask, so I would have oriental features.

As for the fight-scenes, I didn't have the opportunity to really prepare for them well, because I had to keep from sweating and spoiling, the three hours of make-up that I had to undergo each day. (Plus, an extra hour needed to remove the make-up after filming).

In the end, I could give my interpretation of the deceitful and cruel Tong Po (actually my strength and my agility) only once. But in way, I did return to the *Kickboxer* franchise, when I appeared in [Kickboxer: Retaliation](#), alongside Mike Tyson, Hafþór Júlíus Björnsson, Christophe Lambert, and none other than Jean-Claude Van Damme. The movie was released in January of 2018. It's the sequel to [Kickboxer: Vengeance](#), a remake of [Kickboxer](#) which came out twenty-seven years after the original.

**GC:** Jean-Claude Van Damme has directed a single film, [The Quest](#), in which he plays alongside the late Roger Moore. According to you, why did JCVD not want to repeat the experience again?

**KK:** Jean-Claude has an undeniable talent as a director and he does not hesitate to advise the directors who work with him. They benefit from his experience, acquired both in front of the camera and behind it. In turn, he offers them the best of himself in his acting.

Since *The Quest*, he now prefers to delegate the task to the director so he can focus on his interpretation. This allows him to let his mind float easily, instead of confining his attention with a host of technical considerations that can never leave his mind in peace. In this way, he can become fully invested, relaxed, and reactive in front of the camera; he can put himself in the skin of his character with a heightened ability to concentrate.

Also, entrusting the filmmaking to someone else, who he knows is qualified, and to whom he can give directions, gives him time for himself, time to commune with himself, and to read and meditate on subjects that are dear to his heart. Jean-Claude is not only a man of great culture; he is authentic and gifted, with a superior intelligence, who possesses unique insights into people, the things of life, and the universe.

**GC:** Whether as his coach, his producer, or his on-screen partner, you have been working steadily and consistently with JCVD. Would you care to say a few words about this experience?

**KK:** I have known Jean-Claude since he was thirteen. When I met him, I was twenty years old; and from simple sports room colleagues, we quickly became best friends and spiritual brothers.

In 1989, Jean-Claude, who had just acted in his career-launching [Bloodsport](#) (and was about to become an international star with the tremendous successes of the early 1990s), suggested to me that I become his exclusive trainer. Very honored, I accepted his offer. I then had the opportunity to act alongside him in [Death Warrant](#) and [Lionheart](#), and that is how I became a Hollywood actor.

During the 1990s, I continued to appear alongside Jean-Claude in various action movies; and at the same time, I ventured into production. That is how I was an associate producer for [Double Impact](#), featuring Bolo Yeung. I also co-produced [Legionnaire](#), for which I did location-scouting in Morocco for two years. I must confess that I have a special affection for this period film, which deals with the [Rif War](#) and which features [Abdelkrim Khattabi](#), whom I had the good fortune to play. Most recently, I collaborated with Jean-Claude on the pilot of the TV series [Jean-Claude Van Johnson](#), sponsored by Amazon, and, of course, on the last installment of the saga, *Kickboxer*.

**GC:** Let's talk about how you got your journey into films all began. Is there a connection between your Tunisian childhood and your early discovery of martial arts?

**KK:** At the age of seven I had stars in my eyes, as I watched sword-and-sandal and spy films in the 1960s. And it is to a large extent inside the popular movie theaters of Tunis, where action movies had me mesmerized, that my vocation as an actor was born. But it was also at home, from a very early age, where I'd have fun and shoot amateur films, imitating my role-models, like Tarzan or Maciste, that my attraction for cinema took shape. The martial arts, which I have been practicing since childhood, seemed to me early on to be the best way to make my entry into the Hollywood milieu. As an adult, my experiences in the army, the police, and as a bodyguard allowed me to perfect my combat skills.

My childhood was very beautiful, bathed in a diverse yet uniform environment, which was shared by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, living in a fraternal understanding. I could not say if the fact of having spent my childhood in Tunisia, rather than in India or in Australia, made me more predisposed to those life choices. But Tunisia was most certainly a country with no future for me - while Europe was my springboard.

At the age of 15, an internship in the hotel industry allowed me to leave my native land and settle in Germany. One year later I moved to Belgium, still in the hotel industry. After having worked in major, internationally renowned hotels and taken over the management of food and beverage, I had the opportunity to take over a French gastronomy restaurant in Brussels, which specialized in seafood.

While learning English (the mastery of which was indispensable to me, if I wanted to break through in Hollywood), and traveling regularly to America, I also kept up my martial arts training assiduously. At the age of 36, I made the decision to move definitively to the United States. Around the same period, Jean-Claude, then crowned with the halo of success for *Kickboxer*, introduced me to producer Mark DiSalle, who insisted that I be in the casting of their next movie, *Death Warrant*—and the rest, as they say, is history.

Finally, I've spent more time in my country of adoption, America, than in the country of my origins: the Tunisia where I was born and where I took my first steps, and where I discovered the martial arts and action movies, and from where I set out to conquer Hollywood. Naturally, the fact of having had that Tunisian childhood sensitizes me to the social and economic development of my native country. As such, I have many projects in mind to give back to Tunisia, such as, its first place for open-air studios for foreign films - the place it has lost to Morocco.

**GC:** Your life is also rather iconoclastic. Do you believe that the law of attraction has something to do

with your success?

**KK:** I am a very thankful person. I believe in the law of attraction, of course! I believe what we have the ardent desire to obtain, if we work hard to have it, and if sincere and regular prayers accompany our efforts, then we end up getting it - because then events miraculously work in our favor. Since my earliest childhood, I saw myself in Hollywood, and I have been pious and laborious. What my mind dreamed of, the universe brought about.

What are the ingredients of the law of attraction? Having faith in oneself and in one's destiny; working hard every day that God gives; expressing gratitude towards the Almighty for the favorable news that reaches us, the rewards that our efforts reap; and also, respecting others, showing generosity, helpfulness, and compassion. Be a good and charitable person, and what you have offered, the universe will give back a hundredfold!

There is a precept in Islam, *zakat*, which asks the wealthy Muslim to give 10% of his wealth. The Good Lord rewards everyone according to his beneficence. He who gives little will be recompensed little by life; he who offers much will see his desires fulfilled.

I am now over 65 years old; and yet people think I am in my fifties. Why? I take care of the body that God has given me: it is the sanctuary of my faith. I train every day. I drink only occasionally, and never to excess. And now I don't drink at all. I watch what I eat. I avoid soda-pop, and also polluted fish and meats poisoned by added sugar.

But that is not all. I look after the health of my soul and strive to be a good man. I pray—and I train—in my own way, each day that God creates, and I always respect His laws. I pray on all occasions, whether I'm in training like on my bike or in a meditation session.

My physical health is not only the result of the care I take of my body; it is the reflection of the cleanliness of my soul. Martial arts have given me that integral discipline - the discipline of both body and soul - that Islam expects of the good Muslim. Ditto for a Catholic, a Jew, or a Buddhist - all religions converge in their teaching.

**GC:** It is not uncommon to point out - without condoning the bestial wars carried out on behalf of God

or Allah - the allegedly heroic and ascetic ideal of Islam, which would contrast with the "consumerist apathy" of the allegedly atheist West. What are your thoughts on that subject?

**KK:** I am a spiritual believer, open to the world. When I am in Los Angeles, I go to the church with Jean-Claude Van Damme; when I am in Asia, I pray in a Buddhist temple. I pray as much in the mosque as in the synagogue. To me the word "Islam" means peace and respect. And whatever the religion envisaged, one obviously must be careful not to paint everyone with the same brush. Not all Muslims are terrorists or fanatics. For my part, I respect all religions, but I reject all fanaticisms, in that I reject the fanaticism which can be found in all religions.

As for the true ascetic, the true warrior, he is not the one who shoots at an innocent crowd or who beats his wife. He is the one who has the spirit of competition, the taste for armed struggle or with bare hands, the rage of the conqueror; but who can restrain himself at the same time. He is the one who offsets his assertiveness and his passionate temperament with his generosity, his greatness of soul, and his sense of duty; the one who protects and avenges the weakest, and who devotes himself to work, to prayer, and to self-purification.

A warrior makes war on all that can corrupt and disfigure his soul, be it debauchery, drunkenness, laziness, superficiality, or egoism. Islam properly understood does not call for perpetrating barbarous acts; it calls for putting into practice self-discipline and self-purification, in which lies the key to personal fulfillment. It also calls us to watch over our neighbor, whatever his religion may be.

Right now, the coronavirus epidemic reminds us of the importance of discipline: Being able to stay away from each other, and being able to wash your hands, your face. We wish our future to be good; we pray for a happy future for the world, which is going through a difficult period with this virus, without medication to treat it.

Islam insists on the duty of cleanliness: Routine and meticulous cleanliness. It also stresses the importance of praying, not only for oneself, but also and above all, for the whole world; the duty to pray (and to act) so that everyone may be healthy and eat his fill. As such, I am currently dedicated to the distribution of protective masks, through an association that I have just created and which works closely with companies specializing in medical equipment. Your readers are welcome to [write to me](#) for more information.

**GC:** Do you see a universal message common to Islam and to all other religions?

**KK:** Yes, this one: We are all human and we all have the same God, the same Creator. We all live under the same sun and in the same universe, the same house, and we are all passers-by here below. The Prophet Muhammad enjoins us to watch over our neighbor, not to brutalize or enslave him. He enjoins us to respect him, to lend him assistance, and to consider him as our brother. He calls us to lead a virtuous, charitable, and fulfilled life; and to be at peace with ourselves, and to care as much for our souls as for our bodies.

What the Prophet Muhammad, in his own way and in his own language, states, all religions affirm so. Muslims respect all Prophets: Ibrahim, Moses, Jesus. They follow only the last of them, Muhammad, for he is the one who was announced to close and clarify their teachings. Muslims believe the Koran because it contains things that are unexplainable by reason alone; it surprisingly predicts the future.

The good Lord gave me good health (hence my gratitude), which in turn gave me the power to persevere, and then to know the joy of finding an opening, a loophole, for each obstacle in my way. For this reason, I want to give humans and animals what life has offered me. I want to take care of my companions out of gratitude for Allah and out of love for others.

The concern for watching over others pushed me, throughout my life, to work seriously and to devote myself to the cinema and coaching. I am a soldier. Today it is that same state of mind that has led me to launch my charitable foundation, the Kamel Krifa Association, to take care of humanity and all the creatures that inhabit this world. You surely know that Jean-Claude has animal welfare very much at heart. When I told him about the association I was setting up, he made sure to tell me, "Don't forget the dogs!"

**GC:** According to Mike Tyson, who plays alongside you in *Kickboxer: Retaliation*, a great man is not the one guarding himself from the people, but the one being accepted by the people. According to you, to which of those two categories of men does the current US President, Donald Trump, belong?

**KK:** Both Mike Tyson and Jean-Claude Van Damme have declared themselves publicly in favor of Donald Trump. For my part, I do not meddle in politics. Since we are talking about Mike Tyson, I would like to say that he is a person I admire: An authentic warrior. When one gets acquainted with [the videos](#)

[of his youthful fights](#), easily found on YouTube, there is only one possible reaction – you're blown away. And also, Mike Tyson came to find solace, a guide in the Muslim religion.

Again, the asceticism preached by the Koran does not consist in mortifying oneself, or making oneself small. On the contrary, it is a discipline that allows you to give the best of oneself; to achieve the objectives that you give yourself; to live up to one's ambition - be it as a boxer, a practitioner of martial arts, an actor, a writer, a politician, a physician, an engineer, or even a businessman.

**GC:** A quick glance at contemporary film production allows us to notice that a white hero imbibing Asian values is often portrayed in American films and series. That form of soft power, which allows the Asian culture to bleed into the modern myths of the West, is manifestly unfamiliar to Russia. To my knowledge, at least, there is no movie where an American hero cottons onto Orthodox-Slavic values. How do you explain it?

**KK:** Your question is interesting. The attraction of the American action movie for Asia seems to me to be, to a large extent, linked to the mystical aura surrounding the Asian martial arts. Indeed, Russians may well have [Systema](#) and Israelis may well have [Krav Maga](#), but Asia is clearly the unassailable homeland of martial arts.

For Asians, the martial arts are much more than a discipline; they are a religion and a philosophy in themselves. For the adepts of martial arts, all nationalities and all confessions considered, Asia means the equivalent of Mecca. Russia simply cannot compete with the appeal of Asian culture in that area.

**GC:** Thank you for your time. Would you like to add a last thing or two?

**KK:** Whether it's from trips and outings of all kinds, to the previews of the movies of Jean-Claude, Paris is a city where I have many memories. You know, when I started helping Jean-Claude, he was not an international star at all. I fought non-stop for him – by getting on-board financiers, advertisers, and journalists who would propel him forward. I did it for a brother, never asking for anything in return; and without ever letting myself judge him for his excesses with drugs or alcohol. Because who am I to judge my neighbor? God alone is in a position to judge what we do with our existence on this planet. But I am very happy that Jean-Claude, whom I tried to rescue in that long fight also, ended up overcoming his addictions. I prayed to the good Lord that he cast off his demons; and today Jean-Claude is perfectly



clean.

The most important thing in the life of an actor - Van Damme, Schwarzenegger, Stallone - is not his image, his roles on the screen; it is what he does with his life, it is the good he manages to do around him in his life. I always told Jean-Claude that in my eyes, the ultimate goal of our success in cinema, the ultimate dream, was to assist the weakest and the most disadvantaged. I find myself in the perfect moment of my life to remember that.

More than ever, I wish to do for my neighbor what I have done for Jean-Claude over all those years: Helping people in all areas in which I have expertise – more than ever, because I believe in the brotherhood of all men (without distinction as to color or religion). I wish to take action in the fight against poverty, mistreatment, pollution, and war. In a word, to work towards the unity of the world.

That is the goal of my association, which will include an academy for martial arts and a production house for films from all over the world, as much the United States, as well as, Africa, Europe, or China. More than ever, I wish to work in positivity, generosity, love, and the awareness of all those things. "To be aware," as Jean-Claude puts it so well.

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*The [image](#) shows a bubishi illustration from the 19th-century.*

