



SPIRITUALITY AND ACTION: A CONSERVATION WITH ABDELKRIM QISSI

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This month, we are so very delighted to present a discussion with actor and film-maker, Abdelkrim Qissi, who speaks of his life-long involvement with film and his long association with Jean-Claude Van Damme.

Mr. Qissi sits down with Grégoire Canlorbe, writer and philosopher, to reminisce, explain and encourage. His words of wisdom derive from the many rich experiences that he has lived through, and the cast of interesting people that he has met.

Mr. Qissi is a Belgian-Moroccan actor and boxer. A close collaborator of Jean-Claude Van Damme, Mr. Qissi notably played the antagonists, Attila and Khan, in two cult Van Damme films: [Lionheart](#) and [The Quest](#). He is the brother of [Mohamed Qissi](#), the actor who portrayed Tong Po in [Kickboxer](#) and Moustafa in [Lionheart](#).

Grégoire Canlorbe (GC): Could you start by telling us about your up-coming co-directed movie *Lopak l'Envoûteur* [*Lopak the Enchanter*], which will be released in April 2022?

Abdelkrim Qissi (AQ): Originally, I was called upon to act in a scene from a movie whose story revolved around a cannibalistic killer. The script was largely non-existent and the shooting improvised. Abel Ernest Tembo, who was in charge of directing, asked me to appear in a few more sequences, which I accepted to do, on the condition that we rework the story thoroughly and give the film a script worthy of the name. Ernest immediately accepted. I went into production and we agreed to make the film together. The camera-work, the imaging, lighting and grading would be his responsibility, while developing the story, playing the lead role, directing the cast and writing the script mostly mine.

During the Covid period, an entirely new story was created, and a new film was born. Only the title stayed the same. Then, a year ago, we started shooting what was now a feature-length film. The shooting has nearly wrapped up. I want to salute the work of Abel Ernest Tembo, a man excellent with imaging.



Abdelkrim Qissi.

GC: In the ***Lopak*** trailer, the character you play, Molosse, there are a lot of bees, busy yet mysterious. Could you satisfy our curiosity and tell us what is going on with these bees?

AQ: I cannot say too much about the plot of the film at the moment, but Molosse in the script is invested with a mission – that of “healing” humanity, which he considers corrupted by greed and which he hopes to turn into bees devoted to the common good. To that end, he uses hypnosis and a serum that, annihilating consciousness, leaves only the subconscious and the unconscious. In this way, he hopes to put an end to borders and to all that divides humanity; and change the Earth into a perfectly balanced hive where everyone in their cell perfectly knows their place, their mission, and selflessly work for the hive’s well-being, where no one encroaches on anyone and where everyone supports everyone. In his quest, Molosse will be led to do things that will trigger a whole storm around him—both for his family and his old friends.

But I don't want to reveal too much about the film. But to the young and not so young who have the

desire to shoot their own feature films and who, nevertheless, are reluctant to run to fill out files, submit requests to commissions, receive financial aid – to all these people, this film sends the following message: “Do not wait to be supported, taken seriously, introduced to big names. Take your camera and shoot. Let the big names come to you as you build your own success.”

To those young and not so young who have the desire to shoot their own film, who have the talent and the passion but are not particularly well-known to the general public, nor are really involved in the right networks, I am hoping that *Lopak the Enchanter* will prove that no matter what resource they might have at their disposal when they first begin, the people they surround themselves with from the very beginning, will make it possible for them to achieve their goal and make the film of their dreams.

GC: Alongside Mohamed Qissi and Kamel Krifa, you also played in *Lionheart* (also known as *Full Contact*). How did the three of you end up on the set?

AQ: Jean-Claude I have known since his childhood. I met him in a sports center where both my brother Mohamed and I came to train, and where Jean-Claude practiced karate (with Claude Goetz). I was training for boxing. I also met there, among others, Jean-Pierre Valère, who was kind enough to agree to appear briefly in *Lopak*. When they met, Jean-Claude and Mohamed became more than friends. They were inseparable, joined at the hip. They were truly brothers. It was not uncommon for Jean-Claude stay our home.

One fine day, sharing the same dream of breaking into the cinema, they both left for America. After long years of hardship and adventures, they made this dream come true by playing in *Bloodsport*, then *Kickboxer*. I can't really relate the circumstances that led to my participation, at the age of 29, in the filming of *Full Contact*. But briefly, it all boils down to the fact that I was Mohamed's brother (who had just played Tong Po in *Kickboxer*), and that he and Jean-Claude Van Damme asked me, and the producers as well, that I take on the role of Attila. I was very happy with that offer and jumped at the chance. As for Kamel, he's a friend that we met in Brussels. That is how he too found himself by our side, on the set of *Full Contact*.

GC: *Lionheart's* final fight pits Lyon Gaultier, a character played by Jean-Claude Van Damme, against a brutal fighter, who is nonetheless affectionate towards his cat. Even though Lyon is suffering from a broken rib, and lets himself be dominated at first. But nearly at the point of death takes over Attila, the character you play. How did the idea for such choreography come to the film crew? What the filming of

that idea like?

AQ: Contrary to the idea of the white cat, which was an improvisation during the shooting, the idea that Lyon takes the upper hand over Attila when everyone (including his trainer) thinks him to be losing is an idea in the script. It was not improvised when the choreography was being designed. Jean-Claude nevertheless participated in the writing of the screenplay; just as the choreographies of *Lionheart* are all his doing. Both ideas sound good to me—and crucial to what creates the film's aura, now more than thirty years after its release.

The touching affection that Attila has for his pet, which he shows by taking advantage of Lyon being momentarily on the ground to stroke his cat, contrasts with what is, besides, the brutality of the character. A contrast that the film emphasizes in its visual symbolism by making Attila all dressed in black, while his cat is entirely white. The cat in question, which, again, was not intended in the script (if I remember correctly), belonged to a member of the film crew.

The inner strength that manifests itself in the character of Jean-Claude just after his trainer, Joshua, confesses to him that he does not trust him and that he himself has bet on Attila. There is rage inside Lyon, then, to overcome himself in order to triumph over his opponent and prove to Joshua that he made the “wrong bet” (which is also at the very origin of one of the film's titles). And that desire, coming from the depths of his heart, allows Lyon to overcome the pain and to defeat Attila even though the latter, in plain view, was largely dominating him until then, gives the film one of its most beautiful scenes.

GC: You play Khan, a Mongolian champion with whom the character of JCVD fights at the end of *The Quest*. JCVD directed that film; but years before he had already served, unofficially, as an editor to *Bloodsport*. What makes the two films so different despite their partly similar plot? How did you work with JCVD to come up with a final fight that is even more impressive than the one between JCVD and Bolo Yeung [at the end of *Bloodsport*]?

AQ: A major difference between *Bloodsport* and *The Quest* is, it seems to me, that Jean-Claude had the opportunity to work with professional fighters in *The Quest*; while the tournament participants in *Bloodsport* were played by people who were a bit less pros in the field of martial arts. Another major difference is that in *The Quest*, Jean-Claude had matured since *Bloodsport* and was then at the peak of his physical and mental form. The exotic landscapes in *The Quest*, the richness of the animal cast

(including the elephant and the horses), the beauty of the imaging (including the care given to the colors), all that contributes to what makes Jean-Claude's film so different from *Bloodsport*, released almost ten years earlier. However, I would regret that the human relations in *The Quest* were somewhat put in the background during the filming; I believe, because of a timing problem or a problem arisen in production.

Jean-Claude is an excellent choreographer; and in *Full Contact*, like in *The Quest*, trusted himself for the design of the fights. Also, in *Full Contact*, like in *The Quest*, he adapted the choreography for the final fight to my martial style, to what I'm best able to do in an arena. Whether it is the confrontation between Attila and Lyon Gaultier in *Full Contact* or the one between Khan and Christopher Dubois in *The Quest*, for which the fight at the end of *Lionheart* was ultimately the prelude – no stand-in, or any special effect; nor any stunt carried out by someone else was required.

Shooting the choreography was for Jean-Claude and me an easy, joyful, and quick exercise. If I remember correctly, on the set of *The Quest*, Jean-Claude and I worked only nine hours—three times three hours, over three days—developing our choreography from Jean-Claude's general idea. A German Steadicam operator on the set of *The Quest* said of Jean-Claude and I that we were “like the fingers of the hand,” given how we knew each other, understood each other, and had blind confidence in each other in the choreography's execution; given how our moves, with meticulous precision, were easy for us and resembled a ballet; given how our blows espoused each other without ever hurting or touching each other.



Grégoire Canlorbe with Abdelkrim Qissi.

GC: You traveled to Israel for the filming of *The Order*, by Sheldon Lettich (who years before had directed and co-written *Lionheart*). What do you remember from your stay in the Holy Land?

AQ: I had great times with Sheldon. He's a very nice guy, just like Peter MacDonald. I believe that Jean-Claude, by offering me a sort of cameo in *The Order*, wanted to acknowledge my previous performances in the roles of Attila and Khan, two characters united into one in "the Big Arab" whom I briefly interpret in *The Order*.

Regarding Jerusalem, what struck me about that city is the conjunction of holiness and violence that

reigns within it, the spectacle of both beauty and injustice that it offers. All the more as our subconscious associates Jerusalem with the battles and bloodshed of which it has been the theatre throughout history.

The little Palestinian people are a brilliant people who have gone through very hard times over the centuries. Does the Israeli government really have a stake in peace—given that Israel would then no longer be in a position to continue its nibbling on territories? Do Fatah, in power in the West Bank, and Hamas, in power in the Gaza Strip, really have a stake in the war's ending – given that the financial rent they get from the military conflict would suddenly cease if there is peace? For the Palestinian Authority, wouldn't stopping the attacks, reprisals, and rocket fires be the best weapon against Israel—given that it would deprive Israel of any justification for its settlement policy and force nations in the whole world to take the side of the Palestinians against the Israelis?

Being not in the know, I do not want to make any assertions, but only to raise a number of questions that, in my opinion, are worth asking. Let me add that a religious government, as is the case of Hamas, is, in my eyes, a foolish and disastrous thing; since such a government could never represent the entire population, some individuals being firmly religious, others not so much, or even not at all. It is much wiser for a government to refrain from imposing any dogma or rite regarding religion; and to recognize in everyone the freedom to practice or not some spirituality, and the freedom to practice it in the way that suits him personally. That would be one of the pillars of my policy if I were to find myself at the head of the Palestinian Authority. But being not a man of power, I no more aspire to occupy such a position than I would be able to hoist myself into it.

GC: With regard to the Quran, do you believe that it should be taken literally—or that it contains an allegorical meaning that should be deciphered with the help of ancillary knowledge?

AQ: First of all, please know that I am in no way claiming that what I am telling you is the truth; it is only my conception of the truth. I am submitting it to you in the framework of an exchange, not of a debate. I don't just deny myself the status of teacher or preacher; I see it as an incompatibility with well-understood spirituality, which is a personal, intimate affair. What I understand about the Quran is that a huge gulf exists between the word interpreted and taught by men and the WORD drawn directly from the source (the Book itself).

Allah, I understand Him as the source of all that exists; so that God is both present in His creation and

located upstream from it. It is impossible to love God without loving His creation. It is impossible to love Allah, He who is in the trees, if the wood is cut without moderation; impossible to love Him, He who is in the human, if one hurts one's neighbor. The words of the Quran (which it is customary to recite by singing it) are not only made to rock and cuddle the ears of the devotee. That is the lowest, most superficial, level of listening there is, the furthest from what is attentive listening to what the Quran seeks to communicate to us and make us understand.

I didn't learn Arabic at school. I learned it late, when I applied myself to reading a comparative edition of the Quran, including the original text in Arabic and a French translation. The main words of the Book, what I call the catchwords, resonate differently from anything I have been taught. Often they are not even translated.

Here are some examples of those words: Allah, Islam, Muslim, Quran, Jihad. Those words have very precise and deep meanings, characteristics and specificities. I'm not going to teach you what they mean, because that is research unique to each of us. What I can say and repeat is that there is a huge gulf between what you have been taught and what the Quran can teach you. Many counterfeiters have seized the content to use it for their own ends. Such is what created the innumerable religions, themselves divided into different sects, schools and currents of thought.

To conclude my answer: from my reading, I do not see any contradiction in the Book. I do not see any violence. I perceive only love for God in it; and it goes without saying, for His creation as well.

GC: Tell us about your meetings with Roger Moore (on the set of *The Quest*) and Charlton Heston (on the set of *The Order*). And what is your favorite James Bond?

AQ: The shootings of *The Quest* and *The Order* were effectively the occasion of magnificent encounters: Pjetër Malota (who played the Spanish fighter in *The Quest*), Takis Triggelis (who played the French fighter), Cesar Carneiro (who played the Brazilian fighter), Stefanos Miltisnakis (who played the Greek fighter—and who passed away two years ago, God rest his soul!), Janet Gunn (who played the journalist), Roger Moore (God rest his soul!), and many others.

The four and a half months that *The Quest* team spent in Thailand allowed me to closely interact with Roger Moore, to the point where he became a friend; as well as his wife, with whom I have had long

discussions about spirituality, being myself sick of spirituality as you must have noticed. Moore was an extraordinary man; of unparalleled kindness, simplicity, and humanism, he warmly encouraged me, as well as young people in general.

Unlike Roger Moore on the set of *The Quest*, Charlton Heston remained somewhat aloof, withdrawn, on the set of *The Order*; and had a very small role, so he didn't stay long on the spot. Being then of a very advanced age already, I think he was a little tired. He nevertheless gave me the impression of a respectful and respectable gentleman, of great kindness.

As for my opinion on the evolution of the James Bond, it seems to me futile to want to compare them, given how the historical contexts, perceptions of the character, filmic means, are each time different. It would be like pretending to compare Mohamed Ali, Mike Tyson, and Joe Louis! Roger Moore in James Bond evoked Simon Templar, alias "the Saint," and Lord Brett Sinclair, the sidekick of Tony Curtis' Daniel Wilde in *The Pretenders*.

Moore played a gallant, charming, light Bond, devoid of the slightest hint of violence, though no less strong and talented. Sean Connery and Roger Moore are the only James Bond that we can almost classify in the same category – by the finesse, the tact, which they have in common and that is ultimately lacking in the others (all the more, as the more recent episodes highlight action). Some say Daniel Craig is the best James Bond. I don't agree. Pierce Brosnan, for example, was not bad at all, as well as a Timothy Dalton who had a more violent register as would be, nearly twenty years later, Daniel Craig.

GC: Who from Tong Po or Chong Li [antagonist in *Bloodsport*] would win if they fought with each other? Same question for Attila and Khan

AQ: Regarding Tong Po versus Chong Li: If we talk about the actors, I think that my brother, a professional boxer, would win against Bolo Yeung, who, to my knowledge, is an accomplished actor without really being an experienced martial artist or boxer.

Now, if we talk about the characters, it seems to me that, by comparing the performances of Tong Po and Chong Li in their respective films, the former is clearly more dangerous, more gifted, more powerful, in *Kickboxer* than the latter is in *Bloodsport*; so that, if they were to come face to face, Tong Po

would win hands-down over Chong Li.

Regarding Khan versus Attila, it seems to me that the former's power (including mental) in *The Quest* is without comparison with that of the latter in *Full Contact*; and that the Mongol would be the big winner in a hypothetical confrontation with Attila.

GC: Thank you for your time. Would you like to add anything further?

AQ: We talked about thriller and action movies. But I must confess that my personal preference as a spectator goes to contemplative, spiritual films. So, I haven't seen most of Jean-Claude's films (including [Legionnaire](#), which everyone spoke highly of, especially the opening boxing sequence). There are certainly thrillers and action films with a contemplative, spiritual dimension, and that I particularly appreciate such films. Among these are [Gladiator](#), by Ridley Scott, or [Heat](#), by Michael Mann.

The featured image shows the poster for the film, Lopak l'Envoûteur.

