



Written by Marya Zariif / Directed by Marya Zariif and André Kadi / Art Direction by Marie-Michelle Laflamme  
 Music by Pierre Yves Drapeau / Produced by Judith Beaugregard / Distributed by Haut et Court Distribution  
 with Rahaif Ataya, Manuel Tadros, Elza Mardirossian  
 Raia Halidar / Martin Watier / Anne-Marie Levasseur / Naim Jeanbart / Marya Zariif / Mustapha Aramis / Natalie Tannous



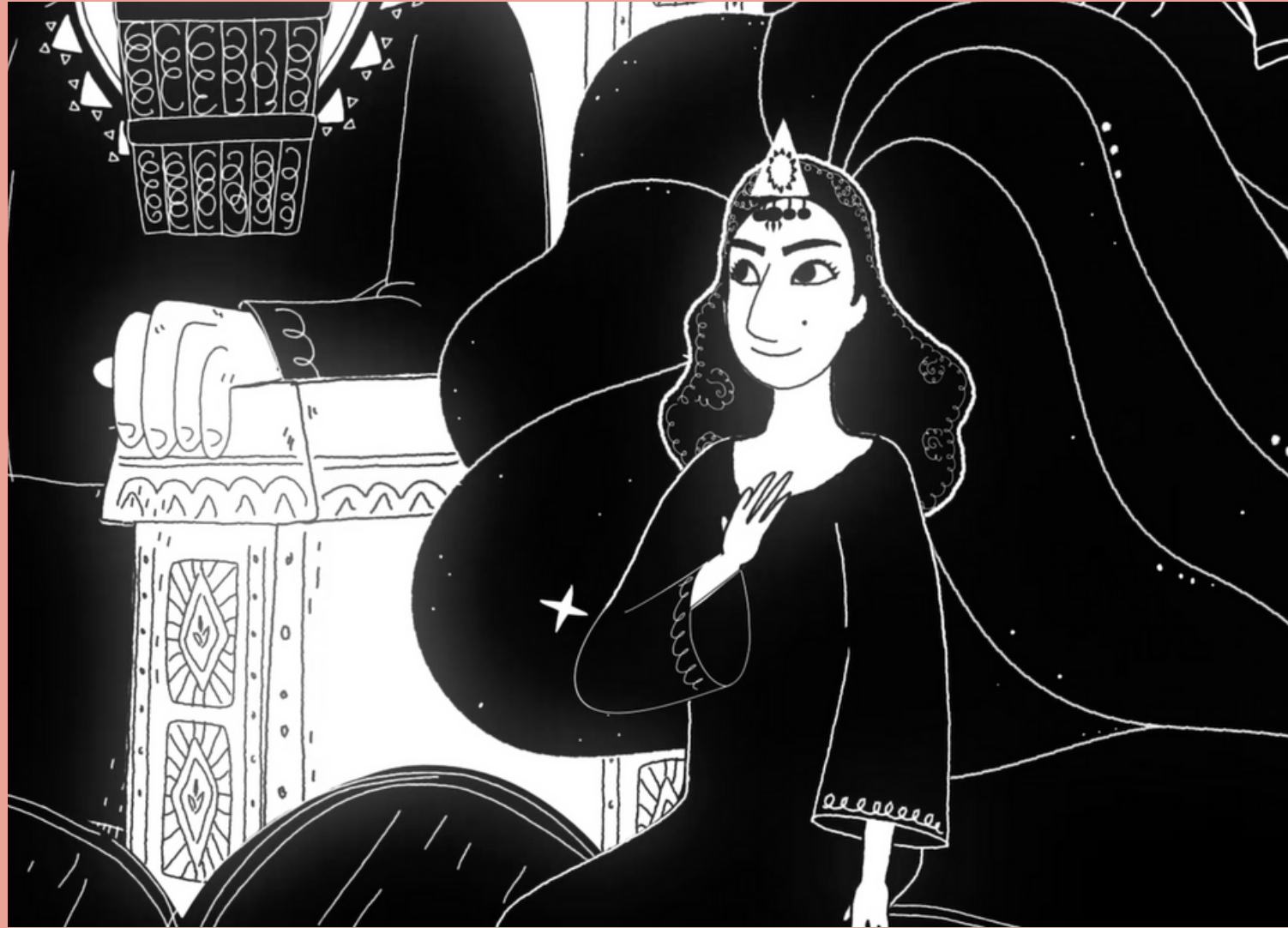
# DOUNIA & THE PRINCESS OF ALEPPO

A FILM BY MARYA ZARIF  
& ANDRÉ KADI



## SYNOPSIS

A few nigella seeds tucked in the palm of her hand, 6-year-old Dounia leaves Aleppo with the Princess of Aleppo's help and travels towards a new world.



## INTERVIEW WITH MARYA ZADIF

### How did Dounia and The Princess of Aleppo originate?

Initially, it was supposed to be a 6-episode mini-series following a single narrative thread. However, my producer, Judith Beauregard of Tobo Films, met Laurence Petit from Haut et Court at Annecy's Mifa in 2019, where she was presenting the project for the series. The idea to make a feature film instead instantly became obvious to us all and we very quickly got down to work...

### Marya, what is your connection with Syria?

I was born in Syria, in a cosmopolitan, Christian, Syrian family that was trilingual and traveled a lot. After a few years in Saudi Arabia, where I attended the French School, we moved back to Syria when I was 9 years old. I already spoke Arabic and French at home, but I had to learn to read and write Arabic very quickly in order to be able to go to school. That was how I integrated – or rather re-integrated into Syrian society. I like saying that this put my tongue back in my mouth! Arabic is the language of verbs and emotions, while French is the language of concepts. Also, as I was myself raised in a double, Eastern-Western culture, I had to find a way to translate all these influences that participated in shaping the person I am today. It's through translating from one world to the other, one culture to the other, one language to the other, one mythology to the other, that I learned how to tell stories. I like saying that this is how I became a "storyteller."





### How did drawing become one of your languages?

When I was little (and also not so little), I spent most of my time doodling on pretty much any surface. I'd draw characters. I'd recount to myself, in a highly literary manner, their appearance, their attitude, their personality, their quirks, weaknesses and secret dreams. As a result I always combined these two inclinations within me: drawing and storytelling. It was always crystal clear to me that I would one day end up bringing my stories and my drawings to life, specifically in animated cinema. My way of drawing always implies a form of movement. For me, a character is above all about energy, a way of moving, and then there is their gaze, which is fundamental, followed by words, laughter, a way of speaking, and a voice. Afterwards, there are general ideas pertaining to dominant features, shades and colors. For instance, for Dounia, I wanted overalls that are green like the earth and a t-shirt that is blue like water, to convey through her the character of a universal little girl.

### What was your starting point?

As always, my creative process entails first and foremost following a character's energy – their voice, way of moving, their gaze, appearance and aura. This is how, while thinking of a way to tell children the story of migrants, I first drew a group of migrants with their suitcases, on the road, gradually giving them first names, last names, personality traits, ethnic or religious backgrounds, a backstory.

The thought that kept coming to me is that in this type of situation, all you can do is collect what and who you are, whatever is left of you, and try to see where to take things from there.







Front and center of the group, there was the image of a tiny little girl, with her arms open, welcoming the unknown, with an incredible shock of hair, an unquenchable appetite for life and boundless joy: Dounia. Dounia, for this name given to little girls in the Arabic-speaking world means “the world,” or more precisely, terrestrial life. This name encompasses everything that Dounia carries within her. The world is hers.

**Dounia is a little girl bursting with confidence, in herself and in life. She is surrounded by strong female role models and men who resist in their own way. Optimism is paramount.**

She lives amongst women with very diverse profiles: Mrs. Dabbouss and Téta Mouné are very different women; Lina is a young woman who is definitely well-connected to her era; the princess of Aleppo helps Dounia make her way through the darkness of night; and Ishtar the goddess is the mother of all goddesses... The Middle-East was matriarchal for a long time, until monotheism became prevalent. With the masculine characters, I also wanted to break away from the clichés of Middle-Eastern men, and men in general. I wanted men who were gentle, optimistic, strong or not so strong, in short a palette of diverse human beings... Jeddo embodies the spirit of Syria. Faithful to his tradition and true to himself, yet wise enough from life’s experience to know that nothing is permanent and that when you have to move on, you just have to move on! His cheerfulness is an art of living in of itself. Indeed, Syrians have this fantastic sense of self-derision, it’s their greatest weapon.

When I drew Jeddo, I asked the animators for a mix between Sabri Mudallal (a famous singer from Aleppo) with his tarboosh and suit (so very Alepine), and Henri Salvador, for his demeanor and infectious laughter – childhood condensed into an old man. There aren't many people still walking around with a tarboosh on their heads, but it was a powerful symbol for me. Like the traditions we're attached to, even when they're outdated... It is also, perhaps, the symbol of his loyalty to his native land, his heritage, his family, as well as his way of being true to himself. In spite of the long journey that Jeddo embarks on, he moves forward, optimistically and open-mindedly, yet he remains true to his promise.

**Who is the princess of Aleppo? She seems to symbolize darkness, the invisible...**

The princess of Aleppo is a character I invented. When you say that someone is beautiful, you say they look like the moon. The moon is extremely important in what we call the Arabo-Muslim world, bearing in mind that it is neither exclusively Arab nor exclusively Muslim but much richer and older than that. The moon is the celestial body that mirrors secret thoughts, love stories, poets. It is beauty in its purest incarnation: reflection, light, a beacon in the dark of night. And in Téta Mouné's tale, it is Leyla, Dounia's mother who, as she was kidnapped by the king of the clouds, became the moon. Through her death she thus illuminates the king's nights and the humans' nights – she makes the night magic. I needed to instill some night in Dounia, for it to represent obscurity, mysteries, dreaming, at times fear and doubt, but also the hope of the day to come, a crossing, an initiatory journey. Coming through the night means making it through war, fear, and death. It leads to Dounia's transformation as she embraces her magical powers.







### And the lullaby that the Princess of Aleppo sings?

The lullaby is very dear to my heart as it summarizes what Dounia experiences in her innermost self. It also gives Dounia a form of faith. Her mother's spirit is still there, yet without it necessarily being a religious metaphor.

### The heart's eyes see everything that is hidden...

Yes, the magic is everything that Dounia sees with her heart's eyes. It is as though the princess of Aleppo were saying: "I exist because you want me to." It's a way of speaking to children and introducing notions touching upon spirituality. This has become so taboo... Our era is afraid of spirituality as it is associated with religious matters, whereas in fact true spiritual questioning doesn't necessarily provide answers but introduces the notion of trust and confidence. What I personally took away from these 10 years of war is a sort of spiritual awakening. For me, without it the world wouldn't keep turning. I think that what keeps Dounia standing is her profound conviction that she has a soul. Her entire culture had taught her that she has a soul, and that everything has a soul. Dounia is filled with this confidence.

### Is this a way of speaking about death, about the inconceivable?

Dounia, like all the migrants of this world, is denied the right to grow up on her own land, as well as the right to move and travel freely. What do they have left, besides finding the strength to carry on in spite of uncertainty and live in the most absolute version of the present? Children like Dounia have a great dream that is taken for granted by most people: that of a house, a home where you can be a human being, and a passport to exist and belong to the world. Basic rights that they are denied because of the way the world works and the power games that are constantly being played.





Dounia embarks on a long journey punctuated by magic intervening as a narrative tool taking them through different legs of their journey. You seem to be establishing a connection between resilience and magic...

I found inspiration through topics I researched and stories I was told about cases of resilience or “making do” that were true accounts. I have seen musicians play music in migrant camps, and young musicians creating bands and music in exile countries that became hits on YouTube. I have seen people who, through the internet – like with the birds at the end of my story (for the birds are in fact a symbol for the internet) – found families who took them in through word of mouth. In a camp in Jordan, which is a dry and barren land (Zaatari camp), I saw with my own eyes an old man take care of a tiny flower that had grown under his tent as if it counted more than anything else in the world... and it inspired the story of Ishtar bringing spring back to life. There is always an expression of humanity – its ingeniousness and resilience – that emerges at some point or other. In life, the moments are less spectacular yet these are the small things that show and prove that life is still there. Like the mothers who have babies in the camps. They are criticized, but life must go on. The Shams’ baby is very important in this respect. Life doesn’t just stop. This was something that was extremely important for me. From what I observed, I saw the Syrians as a people who held on to life. It is truly this appetite for life that makes people resourceful. And this is what I wanted to show in Dounia.











### The magic comes from a seed, the baraka seed. Why?

This entire journey involved so much tension... also, how could they make it through each stage? By drawing strength from their roots. How could they do that? I needed something that could symbolize exactly this. I turned to the realm of spices and found a seed in particular: the baraka seed (also called nigella seed), which has healing and magical properties in the Arab culture. It's a tiny seed that is as black as Dounia's hair – a tiny seed with tremendous flavor and power.

Aleppo is shown as a lost paradise which, however, continues to live on after its destruction, through its inhabitants. Is Aleppo another main character in the film? Aleppo isn't a city, but a province: it was the third province of the Ottoman Empire for centuries. 12,800 years of existence... It was one of the stages of the Levant (a trading post of the silk road connected to Venice) and on the Hijaz route connecting Arabia (and the Mecca) to Islamic territories in the Caucasus. It was a major crossroads of trading, religions, migrations. In Aleppo, you have Venice and the Far-East at the same time, as well as Islamic and Byzantine influences. All of this has blended and combined to form the Alepine character – in its cuisine, as well as in its various crafts and its language. It has a strong identity. It's a harsh city with a strong character, that you can hate at times. It is filled with secret passageways, everything ultimately leading to the citadel. It's a city for the initiated... This richness appears in the smallest details. For instance, it really takes a mystical city for an expression like "I embrace your soul" to be part of the everyday language. Aleppo is very judgmental and can smother the Alepines. Indeed, it couldn't not be a character as it's a steadfast presence.

The entire film is suffused with cultural and religious diversity. This gives the impression of a harmonious cohabitation, through various rituals in particular.

Syria, for whoever visited it before the war, always gave an impression of something that is palpable in the film: a peaceful cohabitation with a wealth of rituals, rites, religions, ethnicities rubbing elbows, influencing one another yet not quite blending into one. Religion is ever present in daily life. Aside from religious fanaticism, which is a recent phenomenon, God and the notion of transcendence are present everywhere – in daily life, in the streets, in the language. It's commonplace. The soul and the spirit are ubiquitous notions. Dounia often says: "Abouss Roho!" (I embrace your soul) when she sees something adorable. Regardless of the faith, there's a transcendence: Djwann believes in music and freedom, Téta Mouné in kindness and goodness, Jeddo, more of a sufi, believes in the universality of the world's soul. Each of them gives God a different face, and it has always been as such. Religious or not, rituals are fundamental. Here, rituals are symbolized by Téta Mouné and her preparing recipes that follow the seasons, making cheese, making eggplant jam... Living to the rhythm of nature and the seasons marks the passage of time.

Let's talk about the score; we enter the film with music and it is very important throughout.

Pierre-Yves Drapeau took care of the sound design and adapted the music to the image. We worked together, based on airs and melodies from the musical heritage of the Middle-East (and Syria in particular), and surrounded ourselves with musicians that were either Syrian or from the same general geographical area, improvising to the images. Pierre-Yves turned these fragments, tunes, melodies, and atmospheres into a film score.



And for the songs?

Dounia's song is an original creation by the Franco-Alepine musician Fawaz Baker, who also composed a few melodies in his style that we used in the film score as well. His approach is sober, mirroring the film's simple, pared-down drawing style as well as the artistic sobriety dear to people from Aleppo. The musical choices were made according to the symbolic meaning of the lyrics and the musical heritage of the region. For instance, when the house is destroyed, it's a Christian song dedicated to the Virgin Mary, Ya Maryam. When they all sing together in the truck, it's a popular Iraqi-Alepine folk song whose title is Rozana. There is also a typically Alepine song called Ya téra Tiri, which is sung when we're in the souk and means "Fly birdy, fly." Then we have the lullaby, which is one of the film's theme songs. I started from a popular Aleppo lullaby, which starts with the following words: "Little Swing, let me swing above the cemetery, my mother walks barefoot...", whose lyrics seemed odd to me but interesting nevertheless as it precisely spoke of this swinging of the pendulum between night and day, life and death, death and life... I somewhat reinterpreted the lyrics for them to be better adapted for Dounia, while keeping some of the symbolic value of the original lullaby: "Little Swing, let me swing above the rooftops of the kings, over land and over sea, every corner of the universe..." While researching this melody, which is very popular in the Eastern parts of the Mediterranean region and used with different lyrics, I found that it was originally an Armenian song (Garoun Garoun by Adiss Harmandian, the son of a survivor of the Armenian genocide who found refuge in Lebanon). The lyrics are a hymn to the spring. Made popular by the Armenians banished from the Ottoman Empire to the Middle East, it could have earlier origins in the Caucasus (Azerbaijan).

In a certain way, the melody is connected to migration, it depicts the richness found in displacing, mixing and blending populations, marrying cultures and also it becomes a hymn for the migrants; I love the idea of its being brought by the Armenians, who are part of Syria's social fabric, have lived through a genocide and represent an important diaspora. For its part, La māmounîyé is a dabké, a dance song (to which people dance holding hands, a traditional middle-eastern country dance). A dabké follows a specific rhythm and Dal'ona, which is a very well-known dabké in the region, was the starting point for the melody.

#### **Tell us about the instruments you chose.**

We have the instruments that are essential to Arabic music as well as Alepine music: the oud (oriental lute), the qanun (a kind of plucked string instrument belonging to the zither family), the ney (oriental flute), percussions, and we added the viol da gamba to uplift the whole. It's a mix of traditional instruments, but it's not all there is to it, as it is also a mix of tonal (closer to the West) and modal (closer to the East) music.

**There's also a strong musicality to the spoken language. The French and the Arabic harmonize beautifully together, to and fro, and various accents pepper the whole.**

It is heavy-duty work performed by the subconscious. It feels as though Dounia is speaking in Arabic. The syntax is ever so slightly Middle-Eastern. By shifting the syntax a little, the spoken language is closer to Levantine Arabic, closer to our emotions, our authenticity. Whenever possible, I chose actors with Syrian origins. Téta Mouné is played by Elza Mardirossian, a Montreal friend from Damascus with Armenian roots who is 80 years old and had no previous acting experience; she had to learn how to pronounce certain letters in a typically Alepine manner.



Young Rahaf Ataya, who plays Dounia, is also from Damascus and came to Quebec with her family as a refugee 4 years ago. Jeddo is played by Manuel Tadros, a Quebecois actor with Egyptian origins who had to learn how to speak Levantine and change his accent even though the Egyptian and Levantine accents are closer than if I'd had someone from Northern Africa. Mrs. Dabbouss is Raïa Haïdar who is from Lebanon and whose family has Alepine origins. Finding the specific musicality, which is that of Levantine Arabic, even though the language actually spoken is French, was very important. A character is defined by their appearance, but also by the musicality of their speech and their heart. Some cultures have to adapt to the dominant culture. I chose the opposite, and I chose to impose a different voice. The time has come to stop folklorizing, for what matters above all is being here.

*Interview by Christelle Oscar, June 2022*





## INTERVIEW WITH ANDRÉ KADI – DU COUP ANIMATION STUDIO

### How did you work together?

Marya and Judith Beauregard were looking for partners who could take Marya's initial creation through the next stages. With my partner, Marie-Michelle Laflamme, we provided Marya with our support and expertise through all the phases leading to a full-fledged animated feature film.

Du Coup animation studio brought the project to life based on all the elements created by Marya (screenplay, drawings of the characters, backgrounds and sets). Starting with all this material, we were able to prepare the storyboard, the animatic and the final animation. Marya would step in to guide us and give us input about what she had in mind. The studio used the original drawings she'd made for her characters; we kept her style and animated the whole.

The artistic direction was a complete collaboration between the studio and Marya for each character, every object, through drawings and sketches in order to develop the film's entire universe. Afterwards, we worked autonomously with the animation and background team.





## ABOUT THE DIRECTORS



### MARYA ZARIF – SCREENWRITER & DIRECTOR

A multidisciplinary artist, Maria has developed expert skills in multiplatform design, screenplay writing and direction, and boasts fifteen years of experience in contents aimed for young audiences. She studied communications and drama writing, and holds a degree from L'INIS (National Institute of Image and Sound). Born in Syria, Marya grew up in Aleppo. She is therefore quite familiar with Dounia's native town as well as with the various ordeals and challenges the Syrians have been faced with since the beginning of the war. Like many other of her fellow countrymen and women scattered throughout the world, including a large pool of creative talents with whom she has nurtured strong ties, the terrible tragedy encountered by her homeland has pushed her into active commitment.

In 2013, she co-created the “Maison de la Syrie”, to pay homage to the Syrian culture. She believes in a Syrian culture that is well-rooted into the world, diverse, warm, inclusive, colorful, gentle and today nomadic – and this is the vision that she instils in her approach at the head of the organization. The Maison de la Syrie has thus presented several narrative installations and artistic performances in public areas. To go further still in her commitment, Marya co-founded in 2015 “Je veux jouer” [I want to Play], a foundation whose purpose is to transform the lives of refugee Syrian children through games. The foundation, which builds playgrounds in camps for displaced citizens in Syria, received the YMCA Peace Medal in 2016. Marya was invited to present the foundation's work through a TedX conference in Montreal in October 2016 whose title was “Crush War with Joy.” In 2020, she created, wrote and co-directed her first animated web series for the young, Dounia. Dounia and The Princess of Aleppo is her first feature film.

### ANDRÉ KADI – DIRECTOR

André, who arrived in Canada in 2007 as a graphic novel author and a musician, joined Frima animation studios, where he stayed for over 11 years. At the head of the artistic department, he founded a branch of the studio in Bordeaux, and opened a 2D animation studio in 2012, where he made the series MaXi and Agent Jean in particular, before co-founding Du Coup Animation in 2018 with Marie-Michelle Laflamme, then Du Coup Production in 2021. A rigorous studio head who directs most of Du Coup's projects, he co-directed Dounia in 2020 on behalf of Tobo, with Marya Zarif. Dounia and the Princess of Aleppo is his first feature film.

## VOICES

DOUNIA	Rachaf ATAYA
TÉTA MOUNÉ	Elsa MARDORISSIAN
JEDDO DARWICH	Manuel TADROS
GEORGETTE	Raïa HAIDAR
LEYLA, LINA	Marya ZARIF
ABDO	Naïm JEANBART
DJWANN	Mustapha ARAMIS
SAMI	Houssam ATAYA
ROSALIE	Irland CÔTÉ



## CREW

DIRECTORS	Marya ZARIF, André KADI
SCREENWRITER	Marya ZARIF
ARTISTIC & ANIMATION	
DIRECTOR	Marie-Michelle LAFLAMME
STORYBOARD	Julie FRÉCHETTE
SETS	Cora NAOMÉE GRENON, Noémie KLOPFENSTEIN
ANIMATION	Audrey MICHAUD, Hugo GIARD-LECLERC, Julie FRÉCHETTE, Gérémy SORLINI, Éloi G. THIBAUT, Keshan CHEN, Marc-Olivier CÔTÉ
COMPOSITING	Karine VÉZINA
MUSIC	Pierre Yves DRAPEAU
SOUND	Pierre Yves DRAPEAU
PRODUCER	Judith BEAUREGARD (TOBO MEDIA)
FRENCH DISTRIBUTOR	HAUT & COURT





## GLOSSARY

**Touté Touté, kholssét Al’Hatouté:** Little blackberry, little blackberry, the story is over!

**Abouss Roho!:** I embrace your soul! (Typical Alepine way of expressing affection, being touched)

**Habibi:** Dearest, My dear, Darling.

**Nour:** Dounia’s father’s name, which means light.

**Leyla:** Dounia’s mother’s name, which means night.

**Dounia:** means the world, terrestrial life.

**Téta Mouné:** Téta (grandma in Syrian), Mouné (provisions).

**Jeddo Darwich:** Jeddo (Grandpa in Syrian), Darwich (candid, simple, kind, or Dervish, like the whirling dervishes).

**Mrs. Dabbouss:** dabbouss means pin, intended to underline her thinness as well as her prickly and sharp personality.

**Djwann:** Kurdish, means handsome young man.

**Shams:** Sun; Abdo’s and Nisrine’s son’s name; his blond hair is as golden as the sun.

**Ya (before someone’s first name):** Ya Dounia, Ya Téta, used in Arabic to call someone: Hey Dounia, Hey Téta!

**Inchallah:** If God wills – Often used in the Arabo-Muslim world to mean one accepts one’s fate, and to let go.

**Bismillah:** In the name of God – Often uttered in the Arabo-Muslim world before an important action like eating, placing an important ingredient in a recipe, leaving to go somewhere.

**Yallah:** Oh God (Ya Allah!) – Often said in the Arab world to indicate movement, departure, progress, either as an imperative (yallah, let’s go! come on!), or as a way of invoking the divine.

**Ay:** Ouch! (exclamation to express pain) – hence the name of the statuette, Ay.

**Choum:** Curse – hence the name of the statuette, Choum.

**Akh Akh Akh:** expresses a sigh, of sadness, nostalgia, heaviness, or even desire, to help process the moment.

**Ahlén:** Hello! Alepine (literally: you are family)

**Khayo - Khayto:** Brother, Sister, Alepine – grownup Alepines often call each other this way, sometimes in their family but also with strangers.



## ALEPPO'S SOUK

Aleppo's souk is a covered market located in the old historic town, which has been classified part of UNESCO's world heritage since 1986. It's the world largest covered market, with an approximate length of 13 km. Most of the souk dates back to the 14th century.

Before its destruction, it was subdivided into several souks and khans (or caravanserais), including the Souk al-attârîn, the herb market, which used to comprise 82 shops, mainly selling textiles, a few of them selling spices.

During the civil war and the battle of Aleppo (2012 to 2016) a great part of the souk was destroyed. By the time the city was reunified after the defeat of the rebels, nearly 700 vendor stalls had been destroyed.

"Nowadays, Alepines go to the herbalist to stock up on condiments, herbs and spices and, much like the way people would in the past go to the apothecary in Europe, also to seek advice and order customized medicinal preparations. Herbalists, who are usually in the profession from one generation to the next, jealously keep their secrets, and these illustrious holders of empirical knowledge often serve as phyto-therapists, aromatherapists and naturopaths as well."

Excerpt from Florence Ollivry's book, *Les secrets d'Alep, une grande ville arabe révélée par sa cuisine* (The secrets of Aleppo, a great Arabic city revealed through its cuisine - Actes Sud)





## TECHNICAL DETAILS

TECHNIQUE	2D
SOUND FORMAT	5.1
RUNNING TIME	72'
ORIGINAL VERSION	French
YEAR OF PRODUCTION	2022
COUNTRY	France

## INTERNATIONAL SALES



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