On subverting societal expectations

Costume designer and director Nadia Acimi discusses pushing yourself out of your comfort zone, longstanding collaborations, and creation as fuel for societal change.

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As told to Cat Woods, 1797 words.

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Amongst the impressive selection of international movies in contention for an Oscar this year, one of the most unforgettable was *Sirât*. Set amongst a series of raves in the desert, the movie was exceptional in terms of acting, music, landscape, and cinematography helmed by director Oliver Laxe [pronounced "Lah-shay"]. The casting directors played a central role, and they are predicted to be amongst the nominees.

One of them, Nadia Acimi, has already won the European Casting Award at the 38th European Film Awards on January 17, 2026, in Berlin. Acimi, Luis Bertolo and Erika Boulic are behind the casting—mostly of non-professional actors—and Nadia, particularly, is interesting in her versatility. She's also a fashion designer with her own label, and a costume designer, working on the 2021 Cannes Un Certain Regard selection *My Brothers and Me*, *Mimosas*, which won the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival Critics' Week, and many others.

Acimi spoke to The Creative Independent about the particular challenges of finding the right people for *Sirât*, the role of non-actors or non-trained actors in the film, and how this process ran from the first day to the last. She had worked with the director as a costume designer, but this was her first gig as a casting director, so an Oscars nomination is a coup.

Acimi tells TCI that this film is the culmination of "15 years of friendship and collaboration with Oliver, five years as a married couple, and three movies together: *Mimosas, La Part du Feu* and *Sirat*."

So, your first language, is that French?

Yeah, my first language is French. I'm born in France. But I have origins from Berber people. My grandmother is French and the three other grandparents are from Berber. Do you know Berber people?

Yes, Morocco.

No, most people think of Morocco because most people travel in Morocco. But the truth is that there are nomadic tribes that travel to and from the North Africa region: Algeria, Morocco and Niger, all the Saharan worlds. You know? And me, it's from Algeria, it's Kabyle people.

Tell me, *Sirat* is getting a lot of awards interest. How does it feel to have worked on something that is getting so much attention worldwide?

What touched me in this, of course, is my process of life and my development, my own development—artistic, human, alternative, marginal, a woman and a professional. I come from…in a way [it's] not classical. I view myself in a typical kind of free way without guarantees of what will push me in this direction to be, one day in my life, in *this* kind of story.

I just followed my heart, and my feeling and inspiration from my art, and also from some hurt, some suffering to be not validated by the society, and to be not in the usual "clothes." To push me out of the line and to make my way as a designer, an artist, a traveler and the "wrong girl." To push me with my kids to travel in the desert and meet a man [director of Sirat, Oliver Laxe], a young guy, to write a script for his first movie. I became friends with him, made *Mimosas*, and afterwards, *Sirat*.

But my way was not "one day I want to be here." It was not like something I was expecting. I just put all my beliefs, hurts, craziness, hopes, and my desire to want to change some stuff in this world with the frequency. And, creation is a way for me to change the world because I think everything is from frequency. Even what you do, it's about frequency. And creation is a good instrument to generate frequency.

Sirat, it's from my essence and the essence of Oliver, a fusion between he and me. For my case, I put my own story somewhere inside this movie. There are these people who have not been validated by society, they're marginal, and judged to be bad in the eyes of the media.

What were you doing before making movies with Oliver?

Since I was 18 years old, I discovered these people [desert and outdoor ravers], this world. I worked [as an image director] in fashion in Paris for over seven years. When I was young, I grew up quickly within fashion. One day my boss proposed that I grow up and be responsible for the international shoots of the designer I was caring for, for the picture at the end, for the shooting. I accepted, of course, because it was like, "Wow, okay." But after a while I was not so good and I was almost depressed, because these people were so good with me. I realized I would like to travel in the world, that I need to see the tribes in the world. My first dream since I was a kid was to connect with tribes, people and women from the old world.

And I took three months to admit it and to go to see the boss and tell him, "I'm sorry, I do not feel good. I have to tell you, I'm so proud you proposed me this, but I want to travel in the world." My boss was this big designer in Paris, and he told me, "Nadia, you are right, you are young, I understand you. I did it. You should go and do it, and if one day you want to come back, the door will be open." And he gave me so much money, also.

I started out in Canada because I was impatient to see snow, then I went also to see native tribes, and I started to make jewelry with my hands, and I did that for 10 years. I went to India, Laos, Thailand, Morocco, worked in many countries. And I wanted all the time to meet tribes, go to see their hand work. And I didn't want to be like a spectator, I wanted to create with them, to see the traditional work they did. I went to the jungle with a family to live where there is no one, no tourists, and I spent two months sitting on the floor in the jungle, looking at how they make embroidery and jewelry, and worked with them to start to make a collection.

I came back to Europe for 10 years… and after 10 years I decided to live in Morocco. I lived six years in Morocco, where I met Oliver in the first month I arrived.

Tell me about casting for *Sirat*.

What made me proud about this movie is that it invites viewers to participate, to cultivate the eyes of the society, to open eyes to another plan, of the beauty of human, to get out the stereotype, the fashion or the cinema in general, and make people think…

I was touched by these people who became actors in *Sirat*, to feel them touched by the arts. Also, in this movie, we put Islam energy with the Quran music, electro-techno, marginal people, people who have been mutilated, to have a stigma for life in the body, and it's something people really run away from normally. They don't want to see

handicapped, they want to see… It's a strange, toxic story in society. They want to see perfection, but it's also what makes them sick, because they want to see absolutely perfect and beautiful women and men in cinema, like in fashion. But that makes men and women feel not good in their body, because they think that beauty is in only one way.

How did you find Jade Oukid?

For casting this movie, I had to make trips to four countries and thousands upon thousands of kilometers by trucks. The production rented me trucks. I went to many illegal parties in many countries, and I had to live exactly the same life, facing police, war, wind, sand, no good GPS, to be lost in the night, wait many hours, arrive… all to make this casting. And Jade, I found her in Portugal in a big party, where the police were crazy and destroyed it all.

But in some subtle space of the heart or something, we have something in common and she feels it, and I feel it.

For my work of casting, it was not only to find the [actors]. I really accompanied them, went with them, took care of them like a mama, because they're like my "petits," you understand petits? [They were] like my, not babies, but I would take them like [they were] my responsibility.

You felt responsible for them.

Voilà. And I feel really responsible to care and protect them all the way through the shooting.

What's next for you?

I started with Oliver, the cinema, that's with him. I made his first movie and my first movie with him. His second movie and my second movie in my life was with him. But after, I have made other movies already with other filmmakers.

With *Sirat*, this one is a co-creation. Those first ones, I was the costume designer, but *Sirat* is different. *Sirat* is really something like, two artists with all their dreaming and intention. It's a fusion. It's a different process to the other movies. And in the other movies of the other filmmakers, I was also as a costume designer and the chef and sometimes makeup.

Is the Oscar nomination meaningful to you?

Yeah. Because it's something realistic, because my way of life is so artistic, so personal, so self-made, no?

Yes, of course, I was not expecting one day to have my name near the Oscar, of course. For that I was like, "oh wow." But I also knew, since the first minute where I convinced and share with Oliver that I need to make a movie with this energy of the underground community, I had the intuition since the start that it'll be something powerful.

To be in the Oscars with Biggie, Jaz, Steph, electro, techno ravers, Islam energy, mutilated people, it's something much more deep and sociological for me. We were in the Palme d'Or, now an Oscar, and in Berlin [European Film Awards 2026]. I realized people are more malleable than I was thinking. People are more open. It's just about which food you give them. And media all time is not…They don't give the good food to the society, [instead, it's] all kind of hate, division, racism.

Nadia Acimi recommends:

The Forty Rules of Love by Elif Shafak

Nadia Acimi Collection

Ouleya Mint Amartichitt (Mauritian musical artist)–"Trickly"

Dogville by Lars Von Trier

Extrawelt Soopertack Dark Side of My Room

Name
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Vocation
costume designer, assistant director, casting director