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TS PRODUCTIONS  
PRESENT

AGATHE BONITZER MAHMOUD SHALABY HIAM ABBASS

# A BOTTLE IN THE GAZA SEA

A FILM BY THIERRY BINISTI

BASED ON A BOOK BY VALÉRIE ZENATTI

TS PRODUCTIONS AGATHE BONITZER THIERRY BINISTI MAHMOUD SHALABY HIAM ABBASS VALÉRIE ZENATTI MATHIEU POISSON GILLES SAGOT ANNE MARIE HÉLINA AMY MARIE AU WELBY WOLF...  
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# A BOTTLE IN THE GAZA SEA



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A film by Thierry Binisti

with Agathe Bonitzer, Mahmoud Shalaby, Hiam Abbass

Based on a book  
by **Valérie Zenatti**

**LENGTH: 1HR.39 minutes**  
**2.35 Format Dolby Sound**

**IN THEATRES - MARCH 23, 2012**

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## SYNOPSIS

Jerusalem and Gaza - less than a hundred kilometers separate the two cities; home to Tal, a 17 year old recent French immigrant to Jerusalem, and Naïm, a 20 year old Palestinian confined to Gaza.

After witnessing a bombing at her local café, Tal refuses to accept that only hatred can exist between these two peoples. She slips a message into a bottle, thrown into the Gaza Sea, that will be discovered by Naïm. From there begins an email correspondence and the emergence of a slim hope that their burgeoning friendship may give them the strength to face the world and to change it in their own small way.

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## Interview Valerie Zenatti cross and Thierry Binisti ...

***First a question to the author: What's the origin of the book on which the film is based? Does it echo your personal story or is it pure fiction?***

### **Valérie Zenatti**

My parents had left France to settle in Israel. I lived there during the 1980s between the ages of 13 and 21. This was a particularly rich time for me – years of questions about Israel and its history... and a time when my political consciousness also awakened. Though we returned to France in 1991, I continued to visit Israel often. I was a journalist at the time, which allowed me to follow the beginnings of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in 1993.

When the second intifada broke out in the early 2000s, I was devastated by the images of the raging violence, which seemed even worse than during the first Intifada ... And I was shaken by the reverberations this conflict could ultimately have here.

***During this period, you wrote a first novel that was very close to your own life...***

### **VZ**

In 2002, I published "When I was a Soldier," an autobiographical novel about my period of military service ... The book was well-received, but I was often asked which camp I chose. And I always answered: "Both!" because I couldn't relinquish supporting both sides, the two stories, both steeped in so much pain.

And then on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2003, there was an attack at the Hillel café in Jerusalem. It was in an area that I knew, I'd had a friend who worked there and I got a phone call that same evening – a young girl who was to be married the next day had died with her father ... And it was, to the very day, ten years after the signing of mutual recognition between the Israelis and Palestinians.

In ten years, we'd gone from hope to despair, and I felt full of anger, full of sadness. I realized that the only way to make sense of these contradictory feelings I was living was through fiction, in the form of a dialogue: it was the only place where I could express what is important to me, the finding of a human reality behind it all. Behind the words "Israelis" and "Palestinians" there are real people, living beings. This statement may sound banal or trivial, but I'm well-placed to know that on *both sides* there are people who still see the other only as a hostile entity, barbaric, indiscriminate. I wanted to say NO! to this denial of individuality. And during the nine months of writing the book, I was in turn Tal and then Naim, and I empathize with each of them.

***And you, Thierry Binisti, what led you to want to adapt the novel to the big screen?***

### **Thierry Binisti**

I told a friend a few years ago of my intention to go to Israel. He then asked me why I could go on holiday where there were bombs exploding. I realized that for a lot of people, their vision of Israel really came down to this: a country at war. But everyday life here is totally different. In Israel or the West Bank, there isn't only political concern, even if it *is* quite prominent. People live, fall in love, have desires ... I wanted to show that side of this world.

Then when I discovered the book, I felt I was reading a story that really expressed a unique state of mind, a viewpoint very similar to my own, with a willingness to explore both sides of the coin, to let both sides speak out – despite the unlikelihood of either speaking directly to one another, or fully understanding the other's viewpoint.



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Photo © TS Productions

The possibility of feeling both emotions at the same time really affected me. The film was born of this desire.

***Instead of a literal translation of the book, you seem to have opted to a loose transposition – following a story that, in some respects, is quite different, even if the same overall spirit prevails...***

## **TB**

The book has a 'parallel letter' structure and that was the main challenge in adapting it to film. How do we show a narration by mail with images? The use of a Voice Over certainly helped transpose the sense of writing. The key was to give characters their own life; they are no longer shown only in a political context but also in their daily lives.

The film shows them going to school, with their families, having coffee with their friends...

## **VZ**

There was a didactic quality to the book that's less present onscreen – where we took a greater interest in the characters' daily life, without constantly focusing on the conflict. I should add that the book was written in the context of the second intifada, where violence was daily – and my own personal viewpoint, with a sensitivity to the Palestinian side, was largely forged by my experiences there a few years earlier, since for security reasons I hadn't set foot in the territories since 1990 or 91. In preparing the film, we came into direct contact with the people of Gaza, we went to Ramallah, on the West Bank, and we were able to experience a reality that I wasn't really aware of in writing the book. Needing to make this story come alive with images rather than just words, we had to make very concrete choices and permit greater realism. How are our characters dressed? Where do they live? What do they eat? What does the world around them tell us of them?

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When working with Thierry, and with the producers and actors, I felt that the end result wouldn't be a transposition of the book to the screen, but, rather, an extension of it.

As the ending is open, there was a question from readers on what happens "after".

Even if the film is not the result of the novel, it goes a little further than the book and partially answers this question. I think the slight difference between the two endings effectively illustrates the meaning of a true adaptation.

***Your collaboration on adapting the novel into the film was, it seems, a very close one.***

**VZ**

We did almost everything together – there was great complicity in writing, location scouting, the choice of actors ...I was even present at the shooting, and I participated in the editing, the mixing ...

**TB**

It was important for me to extend the ongoing collaboration so the film has all the necessary authenticity. It is not so easy to film in a country other than your own. Any of a thousand details can betray you.

The fact that Valerie accompanied me throughout the process was invaluable to the project.

***You focus on the impossible relationship between the characters, yet with some ambiguity. Could we call this an unfulfilled love story?***

**VZ**

To my mind, this isn't a love story, although it can be interpreted that way. It's the story of an impossible relationship that stretches too far, rips apart and then revives. With, at times, a disorder of both sides, but caused by separation and prevention... allowing projections and fantasies to sometimes take root.

**TB**

These two characters who, despite the distance between them, will experience a real encounter, are aware of the disorder their relationship causes at home. But the question is how far they'll allow things to go. Where Romeo and Juliet let themselves be carried away by their love, our characters are aware of having to build their own lives as free individuals.

***In some ways, Tal and Naim are an incarnation of Israeli-Palestinian relations, between attraction and rejection, proximity and distance...***

**VZ**

We can certainly see their relationship as a metaphor, with an ending that postpones the "real" appointment. Tal and Naim have never been so close and yet they don't really meet! And that is precisely what people in the area feel: their rendezvous with themselves and with history is always somehow postponed. Between the beginning of the film, when the bottle is thrown into the sea, and the end, where Naim leaves Gaza at the Erez crossing point, geographically, there's only 3 or 4 miles! But what path travelled by each of them...



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## **TB**

The film isn't pessimistic. Something important has happened between them, something was said, and they'll continue building their lives from it.

We couldn't end the film with a "physical" meeting – reality forbids it. We wanted to stay closer to how things can actually happen. But from our final image, each side can feel a glimmer of hope, a hope that the future will bring the fruits of this initial commitment.

***How was the film produced? One can well imagine the hesitation a story whose background is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict might generate...***

## **TB**

This conflict seems so huge that it's hard to imagine that it will be able to fit into a single film. The issue of legitimacy also arises: what do we really know about the issues in the end? It was essential to us that the conflict stays in the background, and as such the film primarily reflects my own perspective as a French director. Tal's character is of French origin and recently moved to Israel; I feel very close to her, I understand her questions, her misunderstandings and doubts over a situation that she didn't grow up with, in a country to which she's attached but doesn't yet have all the codes.

Moreover, the only foreign country present in Gaza is a cultural center with France – so it struck me that only the French language united the two protagonists.

Some producers strongly discouraged me from getting started. But Milena Poylo and Gilles Sacuto, our French producers, quickly understood the project's ambitions – and they have supported us fully every step of the way.

## **VZ**

Israeli cinema isn't unfamiliar with this story, nor is Palestinian cinema ... But we incorporated our "French look", which allowed us to introduce a third element (via the French language, which is almost a character in the film) to a situation where finding acceptable words for one and the other is a real challenge.

One of the obstacles which faced by Israelis and Palestinians is often the labeling of events and facts. For example, where the Israelis talk about "bombing" or "terrorists" in Jerusalem, the Palestinians call them "military attacks" and "combatants" in Al-Quds. Finding a neutral language can be challenging. A less emotionally-charged language, such as French, helps break the vicious circle of mutual incomprehension and rejection.

***Given the regional situation, organizing the shoot had to raise a number of difficulties?***

## **TB**

The ideal would have been to film half the sequences in Israel and half in Gaza. Except we couldn't! If we took a team of actors and technicians to Israel, it would be impossible for them to enter Gaza, and vice-versa...

But we tried anyway, in particular requesting to film at the French Cultural Centre in Gaza. Despite the support of the French, this proved impossible. For safety issues, risk of abduction, Israel lets no Israeli into Gaza, which would have been a real problem with the technicians.

So, if all the exterior sequences of Gaza really are Gaza, the interior ones were shot in Israeli Arab towns. Some sequences are not just fiction. The images of the large demonstration commemorating the anniversary of the death of Yitzhak Rabin were filmed on the site of the Kings, in the midst of thousands of Israelis who gather every year since his death, to express their desire that the country head down the path of peace. In some sequences, we also used news images from media archives.

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Photo © TS Productions

It's a way to match the fiction with real life, and to remind the viewer of key moments of the conflict at the time when the story takes place, including "Operation Cast Lead".

## **VZ**

We managed to film inside the Erez crossing point between Gaza and Israel. We came as close as we could to the meeting point between our two characters. It was a great moment, thanks to a special permission we received to film. It's a sequence filmed under considerable duress. Mahmoud Shalaby, the actor playing Naim told me how intense he felt in his character taking these steps towards freedom, while thinking of how inspiring it would be to all those dreaming of doing the same.

## ***How did the crew and the local people perceive the film?***

## **TB**

The team was totally mixed Franco-Israeli-Palestinian: the script girl was a Palestinian Christian who spoke French, English, Arabic and Hebrew. Some department heads were Palestinians, others Israeli; the first assistant was Israeli, the second Palestinian...

Everyone was welcomed onboard the project. It is true that film is an island, a moment that brings everyone together around an idea that everyone believes in. And then, politics aside, there's a common artistic sensibility and an openness of spirit.

The actors really needed to know where we were going. We had background discussions to establish trust and make them understand the direction we wanted the project to move in. We couldn't have pulled it off without it.

As for the people, when we were filming in cities that were 100% Arab, the mayor of the city, people who rented their shops, their cafés or their houses were obviously aware of the film's basic

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Photo © TS Productions

storyline. We found that, with very few exceptions, they welcomed the story with kindness, because this is something many aspire to.

## ***How challenging was the casting? A real puzzle?***

### **TB**

For the main characters, and because we wanted the greatest authenticity, casting was done in both France and Israel, and I met a lot of people. We then had very long discussions with the overall team, and held many auditions. Finally Agathe Bonitzer and Mahmoud Shalaby, who were both extremely impressive, were chosen. And I must say that at no point throughout the shooting have I regretted those choices. Each day, on the contrary, made me discover more and more the richness of what they were able to offer their respective characters.

Despite her young age, Agathe Bonitzer has worked with directors such as Christopher Honoré and Jacques Doillon, and has an amazing intuitive intelligence of the game at hand.

As for Mahmoud Shalaby, he's a musician who was spotted by the Israeli director, Keren Yedaya who gave him an important role in "Jaffa". He had a dynamic inner conflict in him, a mixture of suppressed anger and sensitivity. He learned French for the purposes of our film and made a path that was parallel to his character's. In fact, just after filming in Israel, he came to France to shoot Ishmael Ferroukhi's "Free men".

From the moment we found our two heroes, we were committed to finding this same level of quality for each of the other characters in the film as well. The cast led us again to actors and talent from many different backgrounds: French, Israelis, Palestinians living in Israel – a variety that matched the image of the behind-the-scenes team as well as the film's core story.

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## VZ

Casting challenges arose at several levels. For the role of Tal, we had to find someone who could carry our history with both the necessary candor and seriousness to e-mail his responses to this "bottle". I must say that the choice of Agathe Bonitzer was a very satisfying one to me. She slipped into Tal's character with her own questions and input, giving it a rare depth. Besides, she learned Hebrew in record time!

More broadly, the overall casting was also an opportunity to meet people who themselves have fed our history. One anecdote is particularly illuminating: Thierry and I were in the middle of writing, and one day I told him how great I thought it would be if Hiam Abbass could play Naim's mother. Yes, he replied, it would be nice ... and we moved on to something else. The next day, I had an appointment with a friend in a bar on Rue Trousseau. I entered – and who do I see seated at a table? Hiam Abbass, in the flesh!

I gather up my courage, cross over and express my admiration of her – and she warmly asks me who I am and what I do...

I told her about the film we were preparing. As it chanced, she had heard of the book and gave me her coordinates, inviting me to contact her...

That was the start of a beautiful friendship, but also a wonderful story. Obviously, from that moment on, we wrote the role for her, a role she was gracious enough to bring to life for us.

***Your film is about, or lets viewers see and decide for themselves... more than it provides carved-in-stone explanations. Certain choices in staging also contribute to a particularly close relationship with the characters...***

## TB

We didn't want to hold the viewer's hand. From the first images, our intention was to keep viewers slightly off-balance, to involve them in a story they think they know from images seen in magazines and on television – but which don't really tell the whole story... And the questions raised by our characters echo the questions we ask ourselves when faced with such a reality. The camera always stays close to the characters and never lets them go. This is their story, and that dictated how I approached the camerawork...

The same holds for framing. We wanted to represent the characters' inner state, how they felt: for example, in Gaza, the sense of promiscuity, of a closed universe, and the resultant friction related to a terrible lack of space...

We also sought maximum realism in terms of locations, costumes and the soundtrack. This is all the result of many meetings, screening many documentaries on the subject...

***What lessons, what feelings, what "conclusions" – both artistic and human – did you come away from this great adventure with?***

## VZ

Where we have been particularly affected is in the three or four years of writing the script, all of the special people we met – from the translator to the assistants and the Israeli producers – all told us that we'd somehow put a finger on a nerve, that we'd touched something tenuous yet fundamental at once: the idea that outside conflict creates inner conflict within the protagonists.

Starting with characters that are neither archetypes nor hollow mouthpieces spouting ideas – but rather, well-developed young people with real lives and aspirations... I think we've managed to throw some light on elements that were sub-textual in the book, yet which the film has expressed more directly and forcefully – that, for each, a step towards the other has a high price! It's to accept truly



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looking in a mirror held by another, and also living with a sense of having somehow betrayed one's own.

## ***What are the core building blocks of your film?***

### **TB**

The unexpected force of even opening a dialogue between the opposing sides was the starting point of 'A Bottle in the Gaza Sea'. The willingness and inner strength of our characters let that initial sentiment grow into something even deeper and more heartfelt...

### **VZ**

What initial reactions to the book being published had taught me, and that the first screenings of the film have strongly confirmed – is that people want this story told, for many of them feel a similar inner conflict and are seeking resolution. But how does one reconcile sympathy and support for two opposing causes?

Maybe by making a film where both worlds are explored side-by-side, with each point of view valorized. From which side should we study this situation? Being able to step beyond one's own tunnel-vision view of the world is certainly a key first step. The magic of film – where worlds can play out side by side – has made it all possible.



Photo © TS Productions



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## Thierry Binisti

### Biography

Thierry Binisti first started making short films for the Forum des Images, formerly the City of Paris Vidéotheque Library. His primary themes included the history of the city, its inhabitants and its special atmosphere. He then became assistant to Régis Wargnier on "INDOCHINE/ INDOCHINA", to Diane Kurys on "APRÈS L'AMOUR / AFTER LOVE" and to Jean-Jacques Zilbermann on "TOUT LE MONDE N'A PAS EU LA CHANCE D'AVOIR DES PARENTS COMMUNISTES / EVERYBODY HASN'T HAD THE LUCK TO HAVE COMMUNIST PARENTS". He directed "LE LIVRE DE MINUIT / THE BOOK OF MIDNIGHT" in 1996, with Dominique Blanc, produced by TS Productions, which won numerous prizes in short-film festivals.

After his first feature film, "L'OUTREMANGEUR / THE OVEREATER", he directed the made-for-television features "VERSAILLES, LE RÊVE D'UN ROI / VERSAILLES, THE DREAM OF A KING", "LOUIS XV, LE SOLEIL NOIR / LOUIS XV, THE BLACK SUN" 'documentary fiction films' which are very popular on France Television. He has just completed the last part of the life of Louis XVI.



Photo: Valerie Zenatti

## Valérie Zenatti

### Biography

Valerie Zenatti was born in Nice, France in 1970. She spent her adolescent years in Israel, an experience that clearly marks this particular work. Exploring various forms of writing, she's the author of a dozen children's books, translated in several languages and winners of numerous international awards. Her novels have been published by Éditions de l'Olivier, and she has also written several screenplays, as well as translations of the works of Aharon Appelfeld in France.

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## Cast and Crew Credits

Director      Thierry Binisti  
Screenplay    Valerie Zenatti and Thierry Binisti

From the novel  
"A BOTTLE IN THE GAZA SEA" by  
published by Editions Ecole des Loisirs      Valérie Zenatti

Line Producers      Miléna Poylo and Gilles Sacuto  
TS Productions

Co-Producers      France 3 Cinéma  
Anne-Marie Gélinais – EMA Films (Canada)  
Amir Harel and Ayelet Kait – Lama Films (Israel)

## Cast

Tal      Agathe Bonitzer  
Naim      Mahmoud Shalaby  
Intessar      Hiam Abbass  
Efrat      Riff Cohen  
Dan      Jean-Philippe Ecoffey  
Myriam      Smadi Wolfman  
Ahmed      Salim Daw  
Hakim      Loai Nofi  
Thomas      Francois Loriquet

## Technical Crew

Camera      Laurent Brunet - AFC  
Sound      Erwan Kerzanet / Olivier Dandré  
Editing      Jean Paul Husson  
Casting      Brigitte Moidon – ARDA (France)  
Yael Aviv (Israel)

Production Manager      Christophe Désencios  
First Assistant Director      Gilly Ran  
Set Decoration      Boaz Katznelson  
Costumes      Harnada Attalah  
Original Music      Benoit Charest

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