

Interview: Director Olivier Nakache on Truth in ‘The Intouchables’

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CHICAGO – One of the great international films from France, which had nine nominations at The 2012 Cesars – the French equivalent of the Oscars – is the intimate relationship film “The Intouchables.” Focusing on a handicapped man and his caregiver, it was created by Eric Toledano and Olivier Nakache.

The story is unusual because it features two men who are trapped by their own handicaps, and is based on a true story. Philippe (Francois Cluzet) is a wealthy man who is paralyzed from the neck down after a para-gliding accident, and Driss (Omar Sy) is a poor immigrant who is angry at the world for his lot in life. Together they help each other out of the pain and challenges they face, simply by connecting in an odd brotherhood.



Omar Sy (Driss) and Francois Cluzet (Philippe) in ‘The Intouchables’
Photo credit: Thierry Valletoux for The Weinstein Company

The film was written and co-directed by Eric Toledano and Olivier Nakache, who have established their own brotherhood in filmmaking for 15 years, learning the craft by simply making films, and graduating through their own experience from shorts to feature films. Olivier Nakache was in Chicago recently, and spoke with HollywoodChicago.com about the different path he has taken as a filmmaker in partnership, and his film in collaboration, “The Intouchables.”

HollywoodChicago.com: When you first came upon this story, what touched you the most about it and how did that initial reaction make it into the finished product?

Olivier Nakache: I remember when I saw the documentary, I was touched by a special scene, when Abdel [the real life Driss] carried Philippe out of his bed, and it takes five seconds. I was terribly moved by this scene, how can this man Abdel be with this very rich guy, I wanted to know the story and how it was possible. It was just an amazing story that we couldn’t invent. I was just terribly touched by this story. Our challenge in writing our film was to keep the first reaction and emotion to the story in our minds, and keep it in the story.

HollywoodChicago.com: There are elements of race, immigration. class and of course handicap in the story of Philippe and Driss. In your view, how do those issues interact with the relationship, but at the same time are ignored?

Nakache: It is because there is a very special situation. Why would a man like Philippe suffer such a terrible accident? And why would it take this situation for the two men to meet? They only lived 5 kilometers away from each other, but it is two different worlds. They are two lonely men, two handicapped guys – one physical, one social – and they are both outside society. Together, they will help each other out of the traps they have set for themselves.

HollywoodChicago.com: What are absolute true portions of the story that the real subjects wanted to make sure was communicated? How did they best compliment you after the film was completed?

Nakache: Everything was pretty much true, except Abdel didn’t dance or paint. But we made the film for Abdel, and simply adapted his story to Omar Sy [Driss], and gave him the same life and credibility.

HollywoodChicago.com: You said in the press notes that you thought you were finally mature enough to take on a story like this as a filmmaker. What has changed about you that makes it easier to communicate this story?

Nakache: First, we [Nakache and co-director Eric Toledano] didn’t have all the tools of cinema to tell the story. We didn’t study cinema in school, we started with short films and learned by doing it. We thought this story deserved a great movie, and this was ten years ago. We couldn’t get the funding for this story then, but after our third film there was more trust from funding sources, and our collaboration with Omar Sy told us that he – and us – were ready for this film.

The day we decided to do it, we had all the elements that we necessary to make it work – great cinematography, lighting and the ability to get the right film image. If there was any weak point before that it was in the image. We could get the writing and add the comedy, but we also wanted the overall look to work.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is the origin of your collaboration with Eric Toledano? When did you both decide that you both write and co-direct your films and why did you come to that arrangement?

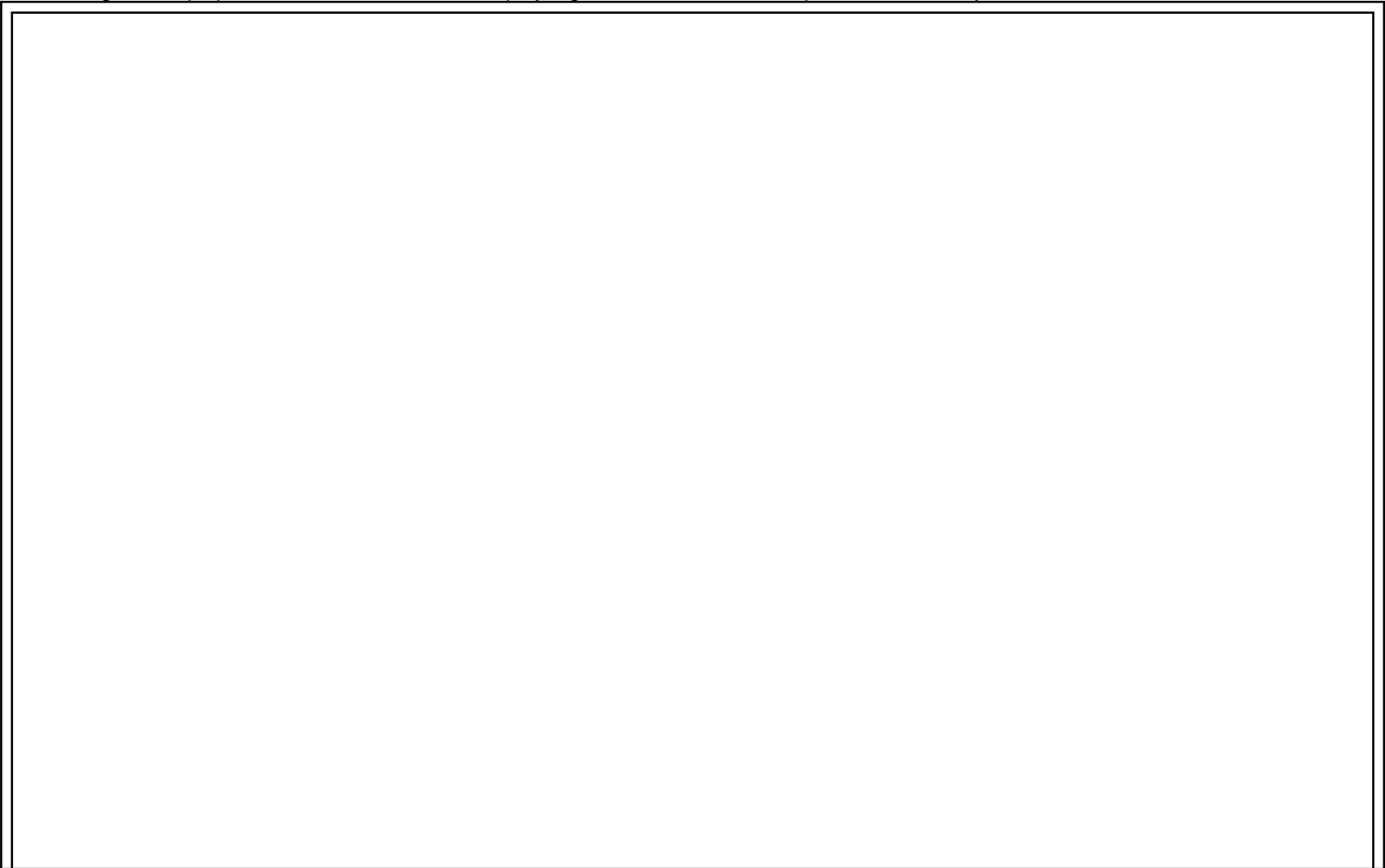
Nakache: I think we became brothers 15 years ago, because we both wanted to make movies. We were 18 years old, and in the same summer camp. We talked about cinema, with exactly the same tastes. Our first short film was a disaster, but we believed that doing films was our strength together. This tour is the first time we’ve been separated, he’s in Boston and I’m in Chicago, it’s weird.

HollywoodChicago.com: What happens when you have a disagreement on set when you’re co-directing?

Nakache: We fight. [laughs] We have a rule, we allow that the other can try whatever he wants. Since we write together, we have a plan on the set, and a screenplay is a promise to find a magic moment – the magic or unexpected moment that we can’t invent, write or think. If I want to try something, I try it, and the same with Eric. I remember on our very first film, Eric suggested something that I thought would not work, but we tried it, and it became the best thing in that film.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is the state of the French film industry, and how in your opinion can it maintain a viability and legitimacy in the marketplace?

Nakache: It has been an amazing year for French cinema. For the first time at the French film awards – the Cesars – there were popular films being recognized, usually it’s just auteur films [films that reflect a director’s vision]. But this is part of an evolution, that auteur-type films are becoming more popular, and the number of paying customers is at its peak, the best year ever.





Olivier Nakache (top center) with Francois Cluzet (left) and Co-Director Eric Toledano on the Set of 'The Intouchables'
Photo credit: Thierry Valletoux for The Weinstein Company

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you think the advantages of technology is bringing to cinema. With on-line opportunities and lighter, better equipment, how do you envision the industry changing in the next 10 years or so?

Nakache: Well, better movie experiences, with 3D and the like, can get more people in the theaters. We are also right on the cusp of digital technology replacing 35mm film. We shot this film by day in 35mm, and all the night scenes in digital. We did side-by-side tests at night with digital and 35mm, and with Omar being very dark-skinned we were able to get a better contrast with digital. And with digital, you don't have to reload, you save a lot of time. You arrive at the set, and you shoot. You make cinema.

Also now more people can make movies. Not everybody, of course, can make a movie, but the idea can be there. There are many short films festivals around the world, but the short that always wins is the best idea. New technology gets those ideas going, but it is a balance. If you don't have the good idea, technology can't help you.

HollywoodChicago.com: Who are your directing heroes, and do you ever put a secret tribute to them in your films?

Nakache: It is the same reference with Eric and I, and that is [French director] Claude Lelouch. His work with the actor is amazing, and we stole his technique of making the set totally free. We also reference Woody Allen, because of the 'idea.' Whatever film he makes – good, bad or whatever – there is always something magical.

HollywoodChicago.com: What kind of stories are you looking for to tell next. What is your criteria for landing on an idea and expanding it into a movie?

Nakache: We need something real or social. We like true stories, like 'The Intouchables,' and we then apply comedy to it. We think differently, so huge films are not our type. If we would do an epic film, but it would be more of a period piece and, as I mentioned before, based on something real.

"The Intouchables" continues its limited release in Chicago on June 1st. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Francois Cluzet, Omar Sy, Anne Le Ny, Audrey Fleurot, Clothilde Mollet and Alba Gaia Bellugi. Written and directed by Eric Toledano and Olivier Nakache. Rated "R"



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