



Satan's Angels/Malaekat Al-Shaytan

86 minutes, 2007, Morocco

Director: Ahmed Boulane

Cast: Rafik Boubker, Driss Roukhe, Amina Rachid, Amal Ayouch, Mansour Badri, Younes Migri, Youssef Chakiri, Amal Chabli, Youssef Brittel

Synopsis

Casablanca, Morocco, 2003: fourteen young hard rock musicians are accused of shaking the foundations of Islam because they play heavy metal music. They are sentenced in a surrealistic trial for up to a year. The civil society mobilizes to try to free them.

Review: Jay Weissberg, Variety

A heavy-metal band is arrested for "shaking the foundations of Islam" in "The Satanic Angels," an accomplished, at times gripping critique of contemporary Morocco that refreshingly adds another dimension to the usual cinematic treatments of the country. Basing his script on a real case, sophomore director Ahmed Boulane fearlessly places blame at nearly all levels of society, using the sheer absurdity of the charges to highlight the increasing grip of fundamentalism on an ostensibly secular state.

Casablanca, 2003: As in every city the world over, heavy metal and gothic culture have their share of devotees, expressed not just through music but through the uniform of long hair, black T-shirts and multiple piercings. Band member Ali (Fahd Benchemsi) gets help from friends cleaning up the rehearsal space so they can throw a welcoming party for his American girl friend, Ariane (Sarah Ogden). Without warning, the authorities raid the den, rounding up 14 members after making sure the American is escorted out of Morocco. Who ordered the arrests is unclear, but conservative elements are quick to spread lurid rumours, full of accusations of satanic rituals.

Most of these kids come from solidly middle-class homes, such as Momo (Youssef Chakiri), whose cosmopolitan parents (Younes Megri, Nadia Niazi) recruit crusading journalist Hakim (Mansour Badri) when their son is arrested at home, his *Metallica* posters confiscated as evidence. The short but powerful trial scene is the strong heart of the picture, as the youths are defended by lawyers (Elhachmi Benamar, Amal Ayouch) who remind the judge that neither musical tastes nor black T-shirts are legally proscribed. The case becomes a cause celebre, attracting partisans from all levels of society.

The film opens and closes with concert footage of the loud but mediocre band, composed of harmless kids having fun with a style that has as much hidden meaning as most other antiestablishment fashions trying too hard to get noticed. Boulane shows how linking devil worship to clothing choice -- remember the controversy over *Ozzy Osbourne* and *Marilyn Manson*? -- can be turned into a dangerously insidious form of control. He also metes out harsh judgment on the media, police and judiciary for allowing Morocco to be hijacked by Islamists intent on transforming a semi-open society.

Despite a final victory of sorts, the film is a cry of frustration, as Momo's father, jailed as a youth for democratic activities, declares that nothing has changed in the country. An end title about a fundamentalist suicide bomber drives home the increasingly divisive problems Morocco and the whole region are facing.

Helmer scrupulously avoids saying whether the king (an untouchable figure) ultimately intervened in the case, but hints at tensions between the Islamist juggernaut and the more liberal monarch.

Direction is smooth, and Boulane does well to refrain from flourishes in the courtroom scene, thereby subtly building the thrust of the lawyers' arguments. An early, gratuitous flashback serves no purpose, while a teasing hint of violence at the start confuses without increasing tension. Sound balance is a problem, especially when music drowns out dialogue.