

RSIFF review: 'Casablanca Beats' shines with a heady mix of rap, defiance



JEDDAH: A lovely mix of rap, defiance and tradition combine in a compelling Moroccan work, “Casablanca Beats,” by Nabil Ayouch (“Horses of God,” “Razzia”). Part of the ongoing inaugural edition of the Red Sea International Film Festival in Jeddah, the film uses music as an intergenerational force to bring about change in a Casablanca suburb. The first ever title from the country to be picked for the official competition at the Cannes Film Festival earlier this year, Ayouch’s creation boasts soul-searching music set to hip-hop beats that will instantly capture the audience.



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In a way, music becomes an escapist adventure for youngsters, a means to let off their steam against dogmatism. It is an interesting mix of documentary and fiction as the non-professional cast play fictional versions of themselves.

Ayouch takes us to the outskirts of the city, where rapper Anas Basbousi (who plays himself) begins to build a program at a real-life arts center called Les Etoiles de Sidi Moumen. In his first class, he explains how hip-hop has brought about change in the US by giving a voice to the disenfranchised and providing a powerful means to express political discontentment.

He pushes kids, even the shy among them, to write about their own experiences and narrate them in a sing-song manner, but quickly faces pushback from some parents and even a local imam who feels that nothing good can possibly come out of music.

After the initial hesitation, the rapport between the teacher and his pupils turns warm and cordial, just like the music, which has a soothing feel. The place where the film is set looks like a Parisian suburb, an indication perhaps that the world is getting smaller.

An amateur cast with individuals who are as good as professional actors, and a marvelous mix of fact and fiction, captured beautifully by Virginie Surdej and Amine Messadi's dynamic camera work, push "Casablanca Beats" into realms hitherto unheard of for a hip-hop focused film. Most importantly, original compositions by Mike and Fabien Kourtzer shine bright in this riveting piece of cinema — but as for the students' raps, we are only given fragments so audiences could be left wanting for more.
