



# COUSCOUS

Autumn  
Season  
2008

**Director:** Abdellatif Kechiche

**Cast:** Bouraouia Marzouk, Habib Boufares, Hatika Karaoui

**Review by Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian:**

Abdellatif Kechiche is the Tunisian-born director who cut a real dash in 2003 with his French high-school film *L'Esquive*, or *Games of Love and Chance*. This is his new movie, about a shipyard worker from an immigrant Arab community in the French Mediterranean port of Sète who is laid off, and uses the settlement cash to open a couscous restaurant. The original title is *La Graine et le Mulet*, or *The Grain and the Mullet*, which are two ingredients of couscous. I prefer the alternative title used for its release elsewhere: *The Secret of the Grain* - more euphonious, and truer to the film's dark and elusive tone than the simple *Couscous*, which rather misleadingly seems to promise an undemanding heartwarmer.

In fact it is a deeply involving tragicomedy, combining warmth with an unexpected level of complexity, and delivering a fiercely unsentimental commentary on the sexual politics of family and food. Some critics have complained that Kechiche's scenes of family life ramble on too long, yet for me they have the easygoing, directionless quality of real life; they radiate charm and authenticity. Without them, the drama would mean far less.

Slimane, played by Habib Boufares, is a 60-year-old man with a face incised by age, disappointment and overwork; he has a typical male taciturnity, cultivated through a lifetime of biting his tongue in the boss's presence. Slimane faces a gradual reduction of hours at the shipyard, and, confronted with a future in which his income and self-respect will be slowly whittled away to nothing, he opts instead for voluntary redundancy and plans to use his payoff to open a fish couscous restaurant on board a specially converted boat. Slowly but surely, he mobilises a network of extended family and friends to help realise his dream.

This is not a foodie-feelgood movie we're talking about - yet neither is it a miserabilist essay in futility. Slimane achieves a remarkable level of success with his plan. But there is a fundamental fault-line in the plan's foundations. For Slimane is divorced, living on his own in a waterfront hotel, and the extended family helping him, led by his ex-wife Souad (Bouraouia Marzouk), are not reconciled to the two women who are effectively Slimane's new family. These are the hotel owner Latifa (Hatika Karaoui), with whom he is having a now wilting affair, and her formidably driven grown-up daughter Rym - a performance of fizzing defiance and energy from Hafsia Herzi. For her part, Latifa is silently resentful of the fact that Slimane does not want to invest his redundancy money in her hotel and formalise their relationship.

What becomes slowly but surely clear is that the restaurant is not actually Slimane's project. The vital dish itself will be cooked by Souad according to her own delicious recipe, extolled at numberless clan lunches, and she has been persuaded by her children to err on the side of soft-heartedness towards her errant ex-spouse. And the restaurant's very existence is all down to the unstoppable ambition of Rym, who reveals a supercharged, almost ruthless entrepreneurialism. She talks to town planners, schmoozes bank managers and superintends the conversion of a leaky old tub into a smart, floating ethnic eatery. And she has one extra, hidden talent for showbiz crowd-pleasing that is revealed in the movie's startling and bizarre finale, which reminded me, not unpleasantly, of the episode "Gourmet Night" in *Fawlty Towers*.



Hafsia Herzi brilliantly conveys Rym's complex, almost unreadable mix of motivations: love, self-interest and anger. She loves Slimane like a father, and she is ecstatic on tasting his ex-wife's couscous for the first time. The businesswoman in her sees how it could be converted into a real opportunity for him and also for herself, so she is enraged when she hears Slimane's son Hamid (Abdelhamid Aktouche) try to persuade him to give everything up and return to the old country. Rym is livid at the implied contempt both for Slimane, and for herself and her mother - the non-family outsiders - who are depending on him to be a husband and stepfather. So the couscous restaurant will be a covert gesture of defiance, even revenge - but one for which she will nonetheless need

the support of Slimane's family.

The restaurant adventure, like the institution of family itself, is thus built by women who must then smilingly let men take the credit. Women are behind Slimane's set-up, and it's women who save the day when things go wrong. And the reality behind the big family lunches is not simply a gorgeous, life-affirming joy in food and shared pleasure. Much of it is about the hard, submissive work of women, analogous to the strain they experience elsewhere in overlooking their menfolk's shortcomings and cruelties.

It is not clear why Slimane got divorced; it may be that adultery with Latifa was the cause. But if there is a womanising gene, married Hamid has inherited it. His seedy affair with a local woman from the bureaucratic ruling class triggers the fateful crisis at the centre of the movie, and it underpins the film's strongest and most painful scene. Hamid's wronged Russian wife, Julia (Alice Hourie), confronts Slimane, saying that Souad, far from being a wonderful earth-mother-in-law, is hatefully complicit in Hamid's behaviour, cosseting him with love and couscous when she could have been reining him in.

There is a fluent, persuasive intelligence at the heart of the movie, and a powerful and commanding performance from Herzi as Rym, who compulsively claims possession of her stepfather, Slimane. He is the absent, retreating paterfamilias whose habitual silence has made him the vessel for so much complicated female passion. Rym and Slimane's mysterious relationship is at the heart of this captivating film.