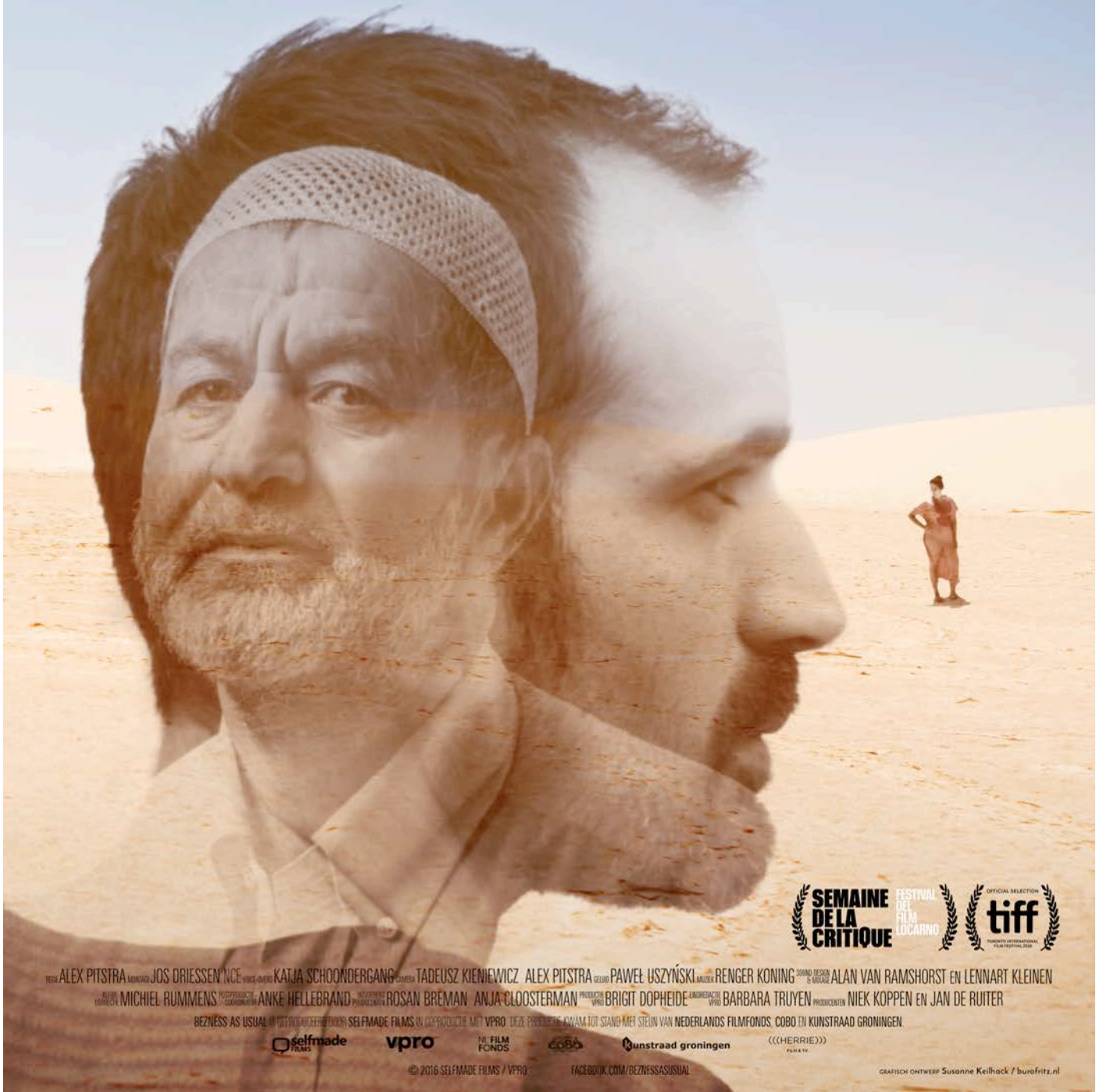


Selfmade Films en VPRO presenteren

# Bezness as usual

een film van ~~Karin Alexander Ben Hassen~~  
PITSTRA



SEMAINE  
DE LA  
CRITIQUE

FESTIVAL  
DEL  
FILM  
LOCARNO

OFFICIAL SELECTION  
tiff

OFFICIAL SELECTION  
tiff

REGISSEUR ALEX PITSTRA MONTAGE JOS DRIESSEN NCE VOICES-OVER KATJA SCHOONDERGANG CAMERAMAN TADEUSZ KIENIEWICZ GELUID ALEX PITSTRA GELUID PAWEŁ USZYŃSKI KUNDEZ Renger Koning SOUND DESIGNER ALAN VAN RAMSHORST EN LENNART KLEINEN  
MONTAGE MICHEL RUMMENS PRODUCEERDE ANKE HELLEBRAND BEZONTOEG ROZAN BREMAN ANJA CLOOSTERMAN PRODUCTIE BRIGIT DOPHEIDE ANTOERACTIE VPRO BARBARA TRUYEN PRODUCTENTEN NIEK KOPPEN EN JAN DE RUITER  
BEZNESS AS USUAL IN COÖPERATIE MET VPRO DEZE PRODUCTIE KAN NIET STAND MET STEUN VAN NEDERLANDS FILMFONDS, COBO EN KUNSTRAAD GRONINGEN.

selfmade  
FILMS

vpro

NL FILM  
FONDS

COBO

Kunstraad groningen

(((HERRIE)))  
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GRAFISCH ONTWERP Susanne Keilhack / burofritz.nl

# Bezness as usual

a film by Alex Pitstra

## PRESS KIT

A Selfmade Films and VPRO co-production.

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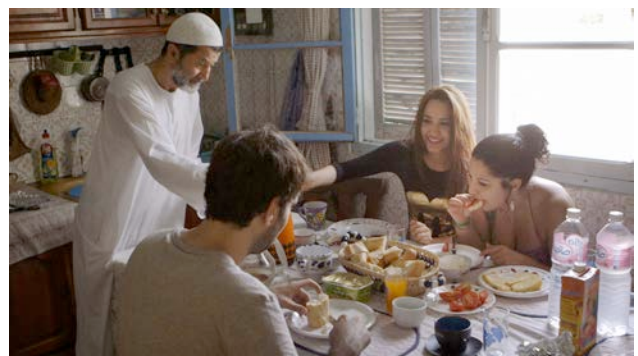
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### LOGLINE

What is it like to be a child of a Tunisian playboy and a Dutch mother? Are expectations and cultures on both sides compatible?

### SYNOPSIS

Dutch filmmaker Alex Pitstra is 25 years old when he receives a letter from his Tunisian father, whom he hasn't seen since his early childhood: the man wants to meet him. In the ten years that follow, Alex tries to build a relationship with his newfound family in Tunisia. He convinces his Swiss half-sister Jasmin to do the same. In this fascinating family saga, Alex is facing not only the intercultural misunderstandings and failed expectations between him and his father, but also the relationship with his Dutch mother. What role should he play as a son of two cultures?



**TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL, *TIFF DOCS* – DESCRIPTION BY THOM POWERS:**

**“Filmmaker Alex Pitstra investigates his own roots as the love child of a holiday romance in Tunisia, part of a wider phenomenon in the 1970s wherein young, impoverished Muslim men would target and seduce European women on vacation.**

Filmmaker Alex Pitstra has lived his life pulled between cultures. Raised in Holland by his mother, Anneke, he longed to know more about Mohsen, his absent Tunisian father. Alex was the result of a holiday romance, conceived after 36-year-old divorcee Anneke met 23-year-old Mohsen in Tunisia. In *Bezness as Usual* he attempts to get to know his father, make sense of his roots, and bridge his own personal cultural divide.

As Alex digs deeper, he learns his parents' relationship was part of a pattern. During the rise of mass tourism in the 1970s, young Tunisian men from poor families would target European women at beaches and hotels. It was their business — “bezness” in the local parlance. Alex wasn't the only child born of these encounters. He discovers a half-sister, Jasmin, in Switzerland and a cousin in Sweden. Alex and Jasmin travel to Tunisia to meet their father. Mohsen is still full of the charm that seduced their mothers. But there are numerous tensions to navigate, arising from his Muslim faith, attitudes about women, economic disadvantages, and checkered past. By filming over a long period of time, Alex is able to create nuanced portraits, like a skilled novelist would. He probes his own motives and contradictions as much as he does those held by others.

As mass migration creates conditions for more children to be born of mixed cultural parentage, *Bezness as Usual* is a sensitive exploration of unexpected consequences.”

**FESTIVAL DEL FILM LOCARNO, *SEMAINE DE LA CRITIQUE* – DESCRIPTION BY SASCHA LARA BLEULER:**

“After a short introduction, the film’s opening credits perfectly illustrate the director’s identity crisis. Karim Alexander becomes Alex, and his exotic-sounding family name Ben Hassen is replaced by his Dutch mother’s maiden name, Pitstra. As she was visiting Tunisia in the 70s after her divorce, she let her spirits be lifted by the young Mohsen Ben Hassen. Their passionate love story burnt so bright she had to end it just a few years later in the Netherlands: their cultural differences seemed to have become insurmountable and Mohsen started to showcase a more and more controlling behaviour. She took the decision to raise her son on her own.

20 years later and equipped with a camera, Karim decides to go looking for his father and manages to convince his half-sister Jasmin, who lives in Basel, to come with him to Tunisia. The young feminist and future doctor only knows of her father through the tales of horror her mother – Mohsen’s second wife – used to share with her. As for the man himself, he remarried once more in Sousse and seems thrilled to see his children again – so much so that he decides to repaint the guest room in honour of Jasmin. Mohsen and his brother feel no shame in talking about their “Bezness” history, which was deeply entrenched in North African culture. Back then, Tunisia was a very popular tourist hub which attracted many European women who gave in to the promises of local gigolos. Mohsen painfully and nostalgically recalls these blessed times, when the hotels that are now empty used to shine like a thousand suns, as documented by the vintage photographs.

As they want to know more, the two siblings uncover the secrets of their Tunisian family, one astonishing revelation after another, like the moment when their aunt emotionally remembers the womanizing days of her brothers, all the while hoping for the younger ones to marry European women as well.

This quest for family roots goes far beyond psychoanalytical self-centredness and explores a great deal of preconceived ideas and intercultural markers. The son/director exercises perfect control over his dual role and comments on the events with a cold, snappy sense of humour. The study he undertakes thus transforms into a fascinating family saga full of twists and turns.”

## ALEX PITSTRA

Surname	Pitstra
Name	Karim Alexander
Given name	Alex
Date and place of birth	April 8, 1979 – Dordrecht
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## FILMOGRAPHY DIRECTOR

2012 *Die Welt* - director, scenario, producer, editor  
Feature film debut, set in Tunisia and the Netherlands.  
World premiere at the DOHA TRIBECA FILMFESTIVAL, 2012  
European premiere at INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL ROTTERDAM, 2013  
North-American premiere at NEW DIRECTORS/NEW FILMS 2013 in New York  
Jury Prize for best narrative feature, BERKSHIRE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL, 2013, Grand Prix of the students' jury, FESTIVAL INTERNATIONAL DU FILM INDÉPENDANT DE BORDEAUX, 2013  
[www.dieweltfilm.com](http://www.dieweltfilm.com)

## BIOGRAPHY DIRECTOR

Alex Pitstra (April 8, 1979) was born from the marriage between a Dutch woman and a Tunisian father. He met his father only later in his life. Alex studied multimedia, communication and film theory and afterwards focused on making movies. He works on various commissioned films, but also on his own projects. In his debut film *Die Welt* (2012) and the subsequent documentary *Bezness as usual* (2016), Alex examines his Tunisian roots.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

"With *Bezness as usual* I want to take the viewer along in my journey as filmmaker and as son born of a 'bezness' marriage. I have been traveling between the Netherlands and Tunisia for the last decade, to find a way to reconcile the two cultures. By filming my quest I hope that others also can identify with the dilemmas and intercultural misunderstandings that my siblings and I are dealing with."

## PROJECT SUMMARY

Original title	Bezness as usual
English title	Bezness as usual
Country of production	The Netherlands
Genre	Documentary
Length	92 minutes, 30 seconds (TV version: 55 minutes)
Language	Dutch, English, Arabic, German
Subtitles available	English, Dutch, French

## TECHNICAL DETAILS

Screening formats	DCP, HD files (ProRes, H264), DVD
Subtitles available	English, Dutch
Aspect ratio	16:9 PAL/HD
Audio	5.1 Surround (DCP), 2.0 Stereo (HD files, DVD)

## CONTACT INFORMATION

Producer	Selfmade Films Nieuwpoortkade 2a, 1055 RX Amsterdam, The Netherlands +31 20 6060789 <a href="http://www.selfmadefilms.nl">www.selfmadefilms.nl</a>   <a href="mailto:mail@selfmadefilms.nl">mail@selfmadefilms.nl</a>
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World sales



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## MAIN CREDITS

Directed by	Alex Pitstra
Editor	Jos Driessen nce
Voice overs	Katja Schoondergang
Camera	Tadeusz Kieniewicz, Alex Pitstra, Rosan Breman
Sound	Paweł Uszyński
Color Grading	Michiel Rummens
Sound Design	Lennart Kleinen, Alan van Ramshorst
Music	Renger Koning
Producer VPRO	Brigit Dopheide
Editor VPRO	Petra Vermeulen
Commissioning Editor VPRO	Barbara Truyen
Executive Producers	Anja Cloosterman, Rosan Breman
Production Manager	Anke Hellebrand
Producers Selfmade Films	Niek Koppen and Jan de Ruiter
with	Alex Pitstra Mohsen Ben Hassen Anneke Pitstra Jasmin Ameera

## BACKGROUND STORY – DIRECTORS' PRODUCTION NOTES

### *Occasion*

In the summer of 2005, I went to Tunisia at the age of 26 to meet my father, after I had not seen him since my early childhood. I only kept a few pictures and memories of him and of course I knew the stories of my Dutch mother. That first week in Tunisia, I lived like in a daze. It was a culture shock, but the renewed relationship with my father and his Tunisian family also gave me a sense of belonging. After the first visit, I was able to talk about my mixed origins more freely, without getting a lump in my throat. I felt as if I had found a real father with whom I could make up for the lost time. Although he soon started to ask me for financial support, I kept going back to Tunisia every year.

### *Jasmin*

In 2010 I met my half sister Jasmin in Basel. She is the daughter my father got with a Swiss, after he was expelled from the Netherlands. Jasmin also was an only child, raised by her European mother. She hadn't seen her father for over twenty years. He found her on Facebook and asked me to mediate. Jasmin was suspicious because she thought we were conspiring to lure her to Tunisia. I assured her that she had nothing to be afraid of. He really wasn't the dangerous villain that she had feared her whole life. Jasmin and I started writing each other. We were sharing a similar history and grew up with almost the same questions about our origin and identity.

### *Catharsis*

Meanwhile, I began to process my observations in Tunisia into a scenario and this led to my debut feature *Die Welt*, which I made shortly after the uprising in 2011. In this fictional story, I imagined how my life would've looked like if I had been growing as the son of my father in Tunisia. My father, my Tunisian half sister and many other family members played roles in the film, but an actor played the main role. During the promotion of *Die Welt*, I was constantly asked about the story behind the film, which to some people seemed more interesting than the film itself. I was left with a somewhat unsatisfied feeling. The film was a successful immersion in the desperate situation of many young people in Tunisia, but I myself remained in the background. I had not yet told the real story. I felt that I had left the chance of a catharsis that I had hoped for secretly.

### *Jasmin's Revolution*

Meanwhile, I didn't really manage to connect to my father and his family. A feeling of ambivalence prevailed, where my need for family and my distrust were constantly in conflict. I was wondering how Jasmin would see her father. Would she experience the same feelings? In the fall of 2012, even before *Die Welt* premiered, she finished her studies and was finally ready to meet him. My girlfriend Rosan and I accompanied her and her boyfriend Luca to Tunisia. Our plan was to record the meeting for a documentary. In that film, I would reflect with Jasmin on how her life changed by the encounter with her father. The working title was *Jasmin's Revolution*, but a real revolution didn't happen. Where I had long lived in a somewhat muddled, naive cloud, Jasmin could immediately analyze things very clear: she felt that as a woman she was less important in the Tunisian society and found that her father showed little genuine interest in her life. She saw that he was a broken man and at the same time very easily seemed to get over the painful past. Nevertheless, she remained cautious and diplomatic during her first visit.

### *Bezness as usual*

While making *Die Welt* I came across the Tunisian film *Bezness* (Nouri Bouzid, 1992), which revolves around a handsome young man from Sousse who enters in many relationships with European tourists, in order to earn money for himself and his family. Later, I read a thesis on the phenomenon of *bezness* in Tunisia and began to make the inevitable equation: the encounter with my mother in 1977 was not a casual holiday romance. In his youth, my father had developed into a talented

Casanova. He was a real *bezness*, a kind of gigolo, trained into business by his older brother. The family in Sousse supported and benefited fully from their activities. I compared the past to the present, where I was regularly asked for financial donations. Was our reunion merely a logical continuation of the *bezness* of the past? Did my father see me as a savings account in Europe, which he had opened in 1979? Although I was always pampered in Tunisia, my annoyance and suspicion grew. My father had been absent for most of my life and had never contributed to my upbringing. How could he ask of me that I now provided for his retirement? Was this *bezness as usual*?

#### *Coming-of-identity*

After we produced the first footage with Jasmin, my partner Rosan and I sought cooperation with Selfmade Films in Amsterdam, to find funding for the next phase of production. During the development of our plan, it became clear to me that I had again avoided the confrontation with myself. I hid behind the camera, so I wouldn't have to feel vulnerable. I realized that the film I actually had to make should be a report of my personal quest, a kind of coming-of-identity, in which I would try to reconcile the Tunisian and Dutch parts of myself. The film would be an instrument that allowed me to analyze, reflect, confront and connect. Jasmin would be an important companion, but not the protagonist. That was I, though I found it uncomfortable to put myself in such a central position.

#### *Production*

During our next visit to Tunisia in 2013 and 2014 we worked with a film crew as much as possible. This allowed me to be more visible myself and I wouldn't have to worry about the technology. Rosan filmed me along the way and would confront me with some critical questions. During my journey I visited several relatives in Tunisia and Europe, including my uncle Salem and his Swedish daughter Monia. In 2014, Jasmin and I went to Tunisia for a second time and this time she did not mince her words. She found that her father could never shirk his own responsibility, regardless of the difficult circumstances he encountered in Europe. She also reacted fiercely against the intolerant, misogynistic beliefs of Islam, the religion that he had embraced in Switzerland.

#### *Illusions*

Jasmin's certainty encouraged me to become fiercer myself, but I could never get really angry. Jasmin quickly took more distance from her father, but I felt things had never been so clearly separated for him: love and economic dependency had completely merged since his childhood. He grew up in the slums of Sousse, where survival was the motto. Critical self-reflection and individual responsibility are still mainly Western virtues. The economic inequality in the world is undeniable. What could I really expect from him? I realized that I had approached my father with a naive look. I projected on him an ideal father, a man who could still repair the consequences of his absence in my life. But that was an illusion. I had hoped that I could find a general principle that would determine how I should relate to him, even when it came to money matters. But that principle does not exist. What remained was the ambivalence in which I was constantly balancing. I can't do much more than accept that ambivalence.

#### *Loyalty conflict*

In this family history, we can't ignore the role of the mothers. In the case of Jasmin, it has always been a sensitive subject. Her mother has never properly dealt with the past and has remained bitter. Jasmin has carried a part of her pain. My mother doesn't hold such a fierce resentment against my father. She only acted rigorously when things went wrong. Afterwards, I grew up without a father, under her wings, but I also felt responsible for her happiness. This conflict of loyalty surfaces in the last part of my film.

### *Emancipation*

My mother and I used to be two peas in a pod, but after meeting my father I started to take more distance. My mom criticizes me. I react to her. This confrontation maybe should have taken place earlier, but I avoided it for a long time. Maybe I could not find the right words or I was afraid of hurting her. In that sense, the film describes a number of steps in my emancipation from my parents. By examining their stories I started to accept that things have gone the way they have gone. In any case, I am grateful that my parents cooperated in this project and allowed me to capture my quest in this way.

With *Bezness as Usual* I take the viewer along in my journey as filmmaker and as son born of a 'bezness' marriage, who has been traveling between the Netherlands and Tunisia for the last decade, to find a way to reconcile the two cultures. By filming my quest I hope that others too can identify with the dilemmas and intercultural misunderstandings that my siblings and I are dealing with.

Alex Pitstra

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

- Alex' mother Anneke met his father Mohsen while on holiday in Sousse, Tunisia, in May 1977. She was 36, going through a difficult divorce and fell in love with the then 23-year old charmer Mohsen and his welcoming family. Anneke visited Mohsen again in the same year and soon arranged for him to come to the Netherlands. They married on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November 1977 in Dordrecht. Alex was born on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April 1979. A few years later, the marriage failed and Mohsen eventually moved to Amsterdam.
- Alex was named Karim Alexander Ben Hassen, but after his father left, his Dutch family and friends addressed him only with his middle name: Alexander. This was soon shortened to Alex. When he was 16 years old, Alex changed his last name to Pitstra, since he felt that there was no use in keeping his fathers' name, when he didn't even know him.
- After about 21 years without contact, at age 25, Alex received a letter from his father, which was sent to his mother's former employer. The employer had forwarded the letter to her new address in Groningen, the city Alex and his mother had moved to when he was 13 years old. On the exact same day that he received that letter, Alex had said aloud to a friend that he wanted to go to Tunisia in the summer, to look for his father.
- Alex' first meeting with his father was in June 2005, when he brought a small camera to capture his six-day visit to Tunisia. In the following visits to his family, between 2005 and 2010, Alex used different kinds of digital cameras and phones to capture videos, without the intention of making a documentary.
- In April 2010, Alex contacted his Swiss half-sister Jasmin. She had been out of touch with her father for most of her life too. He sent her a message on Facebook, to let her know that he could perhaps answer her questions about her estranged father. After some messages back and forth, Alex and Jasmin agreed to meet in Basel, in May 2010.
- Jasmin was born in 1987, from a marriage between Mohsen and a Swiss woman, who was holidaying in Sousse. After about three years, that marriage failed too. Mohsen and his Swiss wife experienced problems, which from her perspective were caused by Mohsen's sudden turn towards rigid Islamic practice.
- A few years after the divorce, Mohsen was deported from Switzerland and moved back to Tunisia for good. He married Leila, a Tunisian woman and they had a daughter, Rahma. She is his third child. They live in Ben Arous, a suburb of Tunis. Rahma was 11 years old when Alex visited them for the first time.
- Mohsen grew up with three brothers and four sisters. They lived in a poor neighborhood of Sousse. Some of the family members still live in the old family house or in another house across the street. Many scenes in the documentary are filmed there.
- Mohsen's oldest brother Salem lives in Denmark, but he visits Sousse regularly.
- In the aftermath of the Jasmine Revolution in 2011, Alex decided to make a fiction film in Tunisia, titled DIE WELT (2012), in which his father Mohsen and several Tunisian family members played supporting roles, next to an actor. The phenomenon of *bezness* already surfaces in the films' second chapter 'Casanovas', though the story was told from the perspective of a young Tunisian man and his father. Alex' debut feature enjoyed a successful

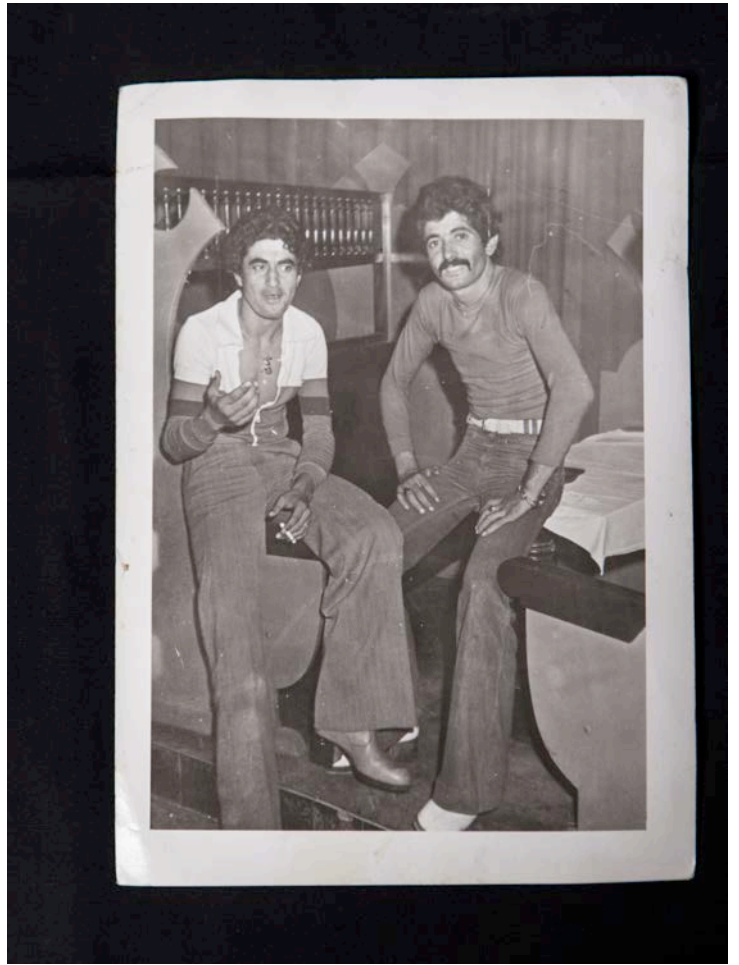
tour along international film festivals in 2013 and received several awards and nominations. For more information on DIE WELT, please visit: [www.dieweltfilm.com](http://www.dieweltfilm.com)

- The documentary BEZNESS AS USUAL was conceived in 2012, as a companion project to DIE WELT. It was first titled JASMIN'S REVOLUTION, because the primary focus would be on Jasmin and the meeting with her father. Production started in September 2012 in Switzerland, during Jasmin's graduation party as a medical doctor. At that point, Jasmin was finally ready to meet her father and agreed with Alex that he could film her journey. The meeting with her father took place in November 2012, in Tunis.
- Later, Alex decided, in consultation with his producers, that the film should be more about his own quest. He also broadened the scope, introducing additional characters, like his girlfriend Rosan, his cousin Monia in Sweden, his oldest uncle Salem and Salem's ex-girlfriend Regina from Germany.
- Filming locations include: Sousse and Tunis (Ben Arous) in Tunisia, Groningen in the Netherlands, Basel in Switzerland and Lycksele in Sweden (Lapland).
- The Super8 archive footage of young Alex with his father and mother is authentic. It was shot in the early eighties, in Dordrecht (NL). In the editing phase, some additional material has been acquired to assemble the introduction sequence. This material depicts the British Hancock-family, while on holiday in Sousse, in the early eighties.
- Some claim that the term 'bezness' is a contraction of the German word 'Beziehung' (relationship) and the English word 'business' (trade). Others say 'bezness' is just 'business' pronounced with an Arabic accent.
- The theatrical version of BEZNESS AS USUAL had its first screening at Festival Cinéma Arabe in Amsterdam, on April the 20<sup>th</sup> 2016, followed by a tour of special screenings with Q&A sessions in selected theatres across the Netherlands. The International Premiere took place on the 5<sup>th</sup> of August 2016, during the Locarno Film Festival, in the section 'Semaine de la Critique'. The North-American premiere was held in September 2016, during the Toronto International Film Festival 2016, in the TIFF Docs section.
- BEZNESS AS USUAL has been nominated for the PRIX EUROPA 2016 in the category TV Documentary.
- At this moment, Alex' relatives, including his parents Mohsen and Anneke, prefer not to appear in media or give interviews.

## ADDITIONAL STILLS

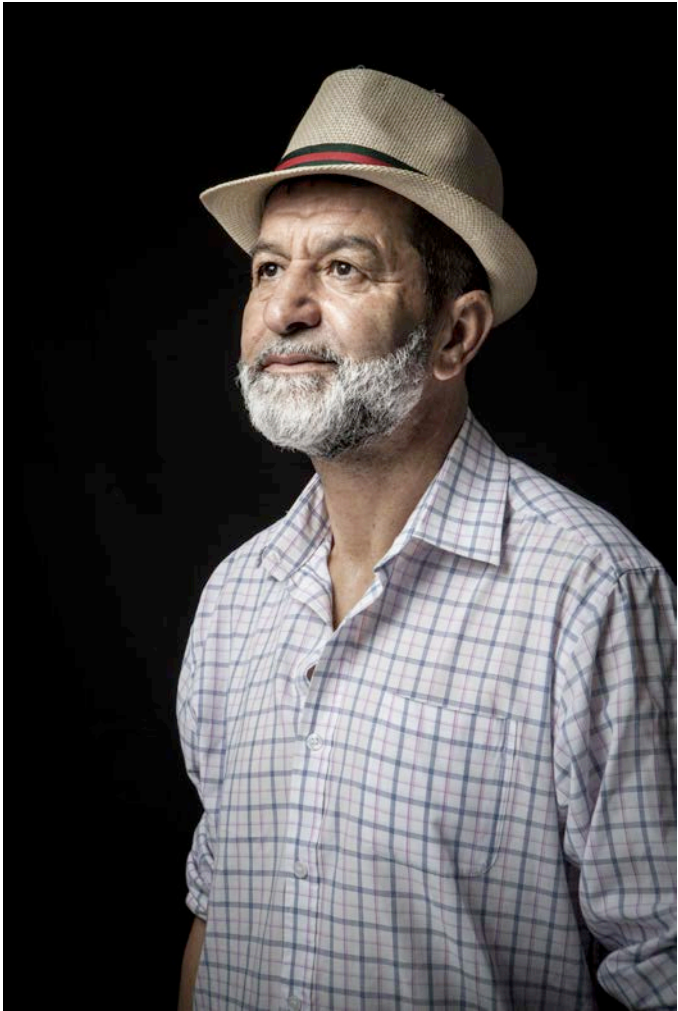


ADDITIONAL PROMOTIONAL IMAGES (available on request: [alexpitstra@gmail.com](mailto:alexpitstra@gmail.com))



LEFT: Mohsen as a young bezness in a discotheque in Sousse, in the seventies.

RIGHT: Mohsen and his older brother Salem.



Photos by: Aymen Omrani