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a film by Mo HARAWE

Austria / Germany / France / Somalia – 2024 – 132 minutes

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SYNOPSIS

In a windy Somali village, a newly assembled family must navigate between their different aspirations and the complex world surrounding them. Love, trust and resilience will power them through their life paths.

INTERVIEW WITH MO HARAWE

The introduction to your film is in the form of English-language TV news footage, a report about a drone attack in Somalia. Is this a way of moving consciously from the anonymous media perception of a country to the "close-up" of an individual story?

MO HARAWE: It's a news bulletin from the British broadcaster Channel 4. The idea was to start by showing the perception from a Western perspective and placing the viewers in the position of seeing initially what is normally depicted about this region. At the same time, I wanted to show how events, like the drone attack in this case, are presented as a kind of entertainment, which doesn't correspond to reality. In the film, you can see what it's really like there: that these are ordinary people, and how these drone strikes affect their decisions in everyday life.

What is your own connection to Somalia? How important was it for you to shoot the film there?

MO HARAWE: I was born in Somalia and grew up there. Shooting in Somalia was very important to me; the film would not have come about without this option. Apart from anything else, because the people I've worked with, who were involved in my last two short films – *Will My Parents Come to See Me* and *Life on the Horn* – were there.

The action of the film is located in a place called Paradise Village. What were the ideas surrounding the choice of this ambivalent name?

MO HARAWE: For me, the title THE VILLAGE NEXT TO PARADISE works on two levels. On the one hand, there is this village by the sea, where it's very beautiful, so it relates to the idea of being "next to paradise". There are lovely places in Somalia, with lovely, wild beaches. On another level, this name can represent Somalia itself; the country has such incredible potential. It has the longest coastline in Africa, with the Indian Ocean on one side and the Gulf of Aden on the other, and a population of less than 15 million. However, there are so many problems in the country, caused both by people there and by outside forces. For me, Somalia is a country "next to paradise"; it is potentially a kind of paradise, but for many reasons that potential isn't being realized.

You have a very moving male protagonist, Mamargade, whose willingness to help becomes his undoing again and again. What factors influenced the way you developed your main character and the overall configuration of the characters?

MO HARAWE: The basic idea was to tell stories about a variety of people in Somalia. Who these characters are, and how they develop, all came from a gut feeling. Of course, it was clear from the outset that even if I invent something, the characters should be very close to reality. The only thing I felt was completely out of the question was to portray them as victims. Despite all the challenges facing them in everyday life, the people I depict don't give up; instead, they find ways of dealing with a situation and resolving it. Mamargade doesn't think much about the consequences of his actions. That's what makes him so human. He never says *no* – and that's also his problem. All the characters have one thing in common; they are there for each other. This cohesion is also the reason why the people in this country have survived.

When characters in the film state their name, they always also indicate the name of the clan they belong to; the family in the film however is not a family in its classical sense.

Is "family" the overarching theme of this film?

MO HARAWE: What interested me wasn't necessarily the classic meaning of *family* that comes to mind when you hear the word but, to a much greater extent, the characteristics of a family. The people there help and support each other, when it comes down to it. For a long time, there has been no functioning government, where the state provides some protection. The only reason these people have survived this far is the clan system. Which is a kind of family.

Although he has hardly any money, Mamargade invests in his son's education. When he is digging a grave for a woman whose daughter has died, she says: *It doesn't make sense to have children*. The film doesn't seem to accept this. Does it also tell us how important it is for a society to believe in the future?

MO HARAWE: What I want to emphasize is that you move forward by sticking together. It was also important for me to show people being optimistic. There's no alternative. I don't think they're making a conscious decision. They don't have the luxury of contemplating a better future. The decision has to be made right now, maybe tomorrow at the latest. Mamargade can say with certainty that he wants Cigaal, his child, to have a better life. He doesn't make the decision to send Cigaal to boarding school right away; he thinks about it. Then he meets this woman who lost her daughter in a drone attack and talks to her. All of this culminates in his

decision. It strikes me as very human that his motivation – to pave the way for a better future for his child through learning – isn't enough; he also needs another prompt. And he isn't even completely certain that this decision is for the best. This isn't about a long-term perspective but about the question of what is good, important and better at this very moment. It may or may not work.

What was important to you in your depiction of the main female character, Araweelo?

MO HARAWE: I don't think I made such a conscious decision about whether the character should be female or male. It was important to me to have characters from a wide variety of backgrounds. Araweelo could also be Mamargade, in a way. When I had a complete version of the script, I even thought about swapping them. I think it's very interesting, when you're writing a treatment or a script, to see what would happen if you swapped male and female characters. I actually feel that Araweelo is my main character. The audience gets the impression throughout the film that it's about him... and then at the end you realize that it was actually about her. She is the only person who achieves what she wanted. In fact, what she is looking for at the beginning is already there, but she doesn't see it. She searches for it somewhere else, and then by chance she realizes that she actually had what she was looking for all along. But for that realization to come about, bad things had to happen first.

Despite all the realism, there are also moments of fantasy: I'm thinking about the brief dream sequence or the mask that Cigaal wears on his head. What were the ideas behind those moments?

MO HARAWE: Those moments are related to the situation. The dream sequence occurs after Mamargade has chewed khat leaves in an attempt to forget his feelings of guilt towards his child. In the dream we see his child being angry with him, while he himself is on trial. This scene arises from Mamargade's thoughts or unconscious, but I also wanted to create a tangible expression of the lightness these people have, despite the difficult circumstances. I wanted to show that they don't take some things so seriously. The film is also meant to have a light quality. For me, it's about humanity and being human. People have problems, but they still have fun, they tell jokes and lies, they play and relax on the beach. They have many layers; they tell stories, they dream.

What was filming in Somalia like?

MO HARAWE: It was clear from the beginning that shooting the film would take longer than would usually be expected. We wanted a local team, but at the same time we were aware of the challenge; since there's no film infrastructure in Somalia, there are hardly any people with film know-how. A few people had a little experience on set from being in my short films. I am of the opinion that many positions on a film set can be learned, if there's enough time and patience, and people are motivated. We filled positions that require technical know-how from the wider region; camera and lighting from Egypt, sound from Kenya and Uganda. Luckily, the people where we filmed were very helpful when we needed locations or permits. Not all the locations had been arranged before filming began, so sometimes as soon as we finished filming one day we had to drive around to find the next locations. We knew that beforehand and planned enough time for it.

How did you find your cast? Are some of them professionals?

MO HARAWE: Apart from one person who had acted in my short films, they were all non-professionals who were in front of the camera for the first time. With the exception of the actress who played Araweelo, we just approached people and I started talking to them. Our casting director Mohamed did a mega job. I spent ten minutes just looking at each other. In total, I spent over an hour talking with them, asking each other questions, and then looking into each other's eyes to see how long the gazes lasted and whether we could connect more deeply and thereby build trust, which we achieved. That was it in terms of preparation. The scenes and the dialogue had been fixed in advance. While the lights were being set up, we went through the dialogue, and then we gave it a try. Working with the actors was easy. We didn't do a lot of takes, on average I'd say four or five each time. We often had to repeat takes to get the sound right, because there was always a lot of wind.

The film has great visual power. You worked with Mostafa el-Kashef as DoP. What were the premises in the composition of the image?

MO HARAWE: Mostafa is a very talented cinematographer with an outstanding eye for detail. As well as that, he's also a cool guy. This film wouldn't have been possible without him; his commitment to come to Somalia and stay there for over three months, to give up so many other jobs, to convince his team from Egypt to come along – that was a huge expression of trust and dedication. *THE VILLAGE NEXT TO PARADISE* is his second feature film, after many internationally successful short films. We met at the Cairo Film Festival, where our short films were screened in the same program. I liked his film and congratulated him on it. At some point we wrote to

each other that it would be nice to work together. I wanted him to do the camerawork for the short film *Will My Parents Come to See Me*. It was all planned, and he even got to the airport, but the Egyptian authorities wouldn't let him leave for Somalia. In the end, he sent his assistant camera operator. But I promised him that we would make the next feature film together. There wasn't much preparation in the usual sense. We'd arrive at the location, there would be ten minutes to think about how the characters should move and where the camera should be positioned. The colours of the fabrics, for example, had already been decided. It was very important for me to avoid stereotypes. Films that are shot in African countries very often have a predominance of yellow, in skin tones too, and a lot of green. I wanted to avoid that. It was often the case that we took the locations just the way they were, because they were simply right. The rest of the time it was about deciding on the camera position, what lenses we would use and what the settings should be. At first, it took a bit of time for us to understand each other, but after a week we were just calling out the lens sizes to each other. There was no time for discussion or trying things out. That was lucky, too.

Interview directed by Karin Schiefer / Austrian Films on May 2024

DIRECTOR – Mo HARAWE



Mo Harawe

is a Somali/Austrian writer and director born in Mogadishu. He has been studying Visual Communication and Film at Kunsthochschule Kassel. „*The Village Next to Paradise*“ is his debut feature film, following his acclaimed short films „*Life on the Horn*“ (2022) that earned a Special Mention at Locarno International Film Festival, while „*Will My Parents Come to See Me*“ (2022) was nominated for the European Film Award, won the Grand Prix at Clermont-Ferrand as well as German LOLA and Austrian Film Award for Best Short Film in 2023.

CAST

Mamargade
Araweelo
Cigaal

Ahmed Ali Farah
Anab Ahmed Ibrahim
Ahmed Mohamud Saleban

CREW

Director Mo Harawe
Writer Mo Harawe
Cinematography Mostafa El Kashef
Casting Mohamed Mohamud Jama
Production Design Nuur Abdulkadir
Make up & Hair Fatuma Yussuf
Costume Design Sarah Ismail
Sound Willis Abuto, Anne Gibourg, Guadalupe Cassius, Christophe Vingtrinier
Editing Joana Scrinzi, aea

Executive Producers Nuh Musse Berjeeb, Abdimalik Yusuf, Ahmed Farah, Osman Hassan Hussein

Co-producers Jean-Christophe Reymond, Nicole Gerhards, Mo Harawe

Producers Sabine Moser & Oliver Neumann

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NiKo Film (Germany)
Maanmaal ACC (Somalia)

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