

**CANNES**

# 'The Village Next to Paradise' Review: A Promising Debut Wonders How We Can Find Meaning in a World of Brutality

Cannes: Somali-Austrian director Mo Harawe's debut feature takes a nuanced, if brutal, approach to illustrating the way that war can interfere with the traditional milestones of life and death.

BY LEILA LATIF [✉](#)

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'The Village Next to Paradise' Cannes

The Western lens can portray Africa, and Africans, as a monolith and not see past images of safaris and news reports of famine, terrorism and unending conflict. “**The Village Next to Paradise**” opens with that lens being subverted, commencing with a news report from the UK’s Channel 4 for a steely faced news anchor reports on a drone attack from the US that has killed a Somali terrorist with ties to Al-Qaeda. The footage of the attack is shown from above with his vehicle hit by two missiles in quick succession and a digital recreation shows how this advanced American military technology is able to take out its enemies without stepping foot in their countries. But then the perspective shifts, the bright sunshine floods the screen as the man is surrounded by strangers who have each donated a little money to have his grave dug and the Muslim funeral rights are observed. Who this man was, or whether he was truly who the media reported, is really never clarified. Still, the **film** establishes that this is not a story about Africa but an intimate look at the lives of a Somalian makeshift family, who, despite their struggles, view each other as fully human and each deserving of the dignity of a proper burial.

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The debut film from Somali-Austrian director Mo Harawe’s plays in **Cannes** Un Certain Regard selection and largely takes place in an isolated village whose white sandy beaches stretch out next to the picturesque turquoise of the Indian Ocean. While life can be challenging, and money is scarce, Harawe’s world is beautiful, filled with open planes under pale blue skies and moments of tender kindness between grave-digger and single father Mamargade and his precocious young son Cigaal, who is willing to do anything for to help him build a life better than his own. When they move to

a new home to facilitate Cigaal getting a better education, they are joined by a young divorcee, Araweelo, who, by the midway point, is revealed to be just as significant a protagonist of the piece.

As Marmargade digs his graves, the film slows to give space to the existential questions around the futility of existence. A woman sits next to Marmargade, wrapped in dusty brown fabrics as she stares at her own daughter's grave and, after a long pause simply offers, "It doesn't make sense to have children. There's no future." But the film, whilst giving space to the pain and despair of the region, sees more potential and hope in the lives of these people. There's a culture and human history to be preserved, and in Cigaal a tangible future that Mamargade and Araweelo must keep striving to guarantee. Just as Mamargade gazes adoringly at his son through the school gates, the film looks upon him and Araweelo with equal tenderness, with exquisite composition and colour in the shots and framing them with the care of precious works of art. And there's a culturally specific magic in those images when the characters chew khat, and the world around them lightly edges into the surreal. The film could do with more such flights of fancy, as Harawe's visual language is so rich and singular. The film's conclusion is also somewhat jarringly cruel; even though we have commenced with drone warfare and spent so long mourning by gravesites, there's a bleakness to its final act that feels a little cheap in its brutality.

But even if the film chooses the same level of brutality for its characters as the American drones in its opening credits do for a truck driving down the Somalian coast. It at least never does so from a distance, immersing us and giving weight to the tragedy and loss that each one feels.

Whether or not to have children and invest your life in their future is a profoundly human question that resonates across the globe. Even without the conflicts that have engulfed Somalia for the past decades it is not always easy to imagine that it is wise to bring a new generation into a world with all its horrors and a potential climate apocalypse on the horizon. But if there is a bright future to hope for to distract ourselves from staring off into that

abyss, it is that Harawe's debut has shown some extremely exciting potential for both him and the myriad stories and talents that lie within Somalia's borders.

## Grade: B

*"The Village Next to Paradise" premiered at the 2024 Cannes Film Festival. It is currently seeking U.S. distribution.*

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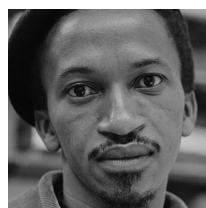
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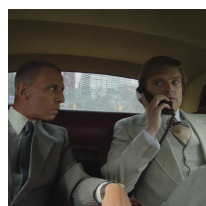
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