



A screaming man

Director: Mahamat-Saleh Haroun
Country: France/Belgium/Chad
Date: 2010

*A review by Derek Malcolm of the **London Evening Standard**:*

Adam is 60 and a former swimming champion. Now he works as the chief poolside attendant at a resort hotel in N'Djamena. Everyone calls him "champ" and he's a proud man. But when some Chinese people take over the hotel, his son Abel is promoted to his job and he is relegated to gatekeeper. His whole world has collapsed around him.

This is Chad in the midst of yet another civil war, with helicopters flying overhead and troops in the town who apprehend Adam on his way to work. The edict goes out that either men like Adam contribute financially to the government's war effort or send a relative to fight the rebels. Since he has no money, Adam has to send his son. The result is tragedy, and there is a finale of quietly devastating power.

Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's film is blessed by an outstanding performance from Youssef Djaoro as the old champion, dignified but sad and increasingly in despair. Haroun, himself affected by the civil wars in Chad, clearly knows what he is talking about and slowly but surely grips us with the old man's dilemma. Did he send his son off to war just because he had no money for the local government official, or was jealousy at losing his job to the boy part of the equation?

This is not only a good-looking, well directed and splendidly shot and acted film. It is an unforgettable snapshot of a failed country, and one of the best films in London at the moment.

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*An interview with the director by Tom Begg in **Think Africa Press**:*

Cinema is undergoing something of a revival in N'Djamena, the capital of Chad: one of its original film houses, La Normandie has just been renovated with massive funding from the President, Idriss Deby Itno, which will open later this year with a distinctly cosmopolitan programme. Each month La Normandie will show a film from an African country, one from the U.S, one from Europe, one from India, one in Arabic and one from China.

The renovation of La Normandie, closed decades ago and since used as a public toilet, has already got Chadian filmgoers dreaming. There are rumours that the capital's other abandoned film-houses, the Schehérezade and the Rio will also be reopened shortly, bucking the trend of cinemas closing down across the region. What has sparked this sudden interest in cinema in a country that has been locked in the throes of a bloody civil war since 2005?

In 2010, Mahamat Saleh Haroun, a native of Abéché, won the jury prize at Cannes with his latest film, A Screaming Man. Haroun is no newcomer to the festival circuit and is certainly no stranger to international critical acclaim. In 2006 he won the Jury Prize at Venice with Daratt (Dry Season), and has racked up an impressive list of festival awards with earlier films. However, it was Cannes and A Screaming Man that really made people take notice. The Chadian government realized that this kind of international recognition could be a major asset and has kick-started the film industry in N'Djamena, starting with La Normandie.

A Screaming Man opened in the UK on Friday the 13th (unlucky for some but going by reviews in the press, certainly not for Haroun) at the BFI Sounthbank, which is also screening a retrospective of the director's work. His latest, the title of which is drawn from a line of Aimé Césaire's Cahiers d'un retour au pays natal, deals with the relationship between fathers and sons in Chad and places it in the perspective of the country's brutal civil strife.

Adam (played by newcomer Youssef Djaoro), a former swimming champion, runs the swimming pool at an exclusive hotel in N'Djamena. His son Abdel (Diouc Koma) also works there as his assistant, and seemingly all is well in their lives. However, when the hotel is bought by new Chinese owners, Adam loses his job to Abdel and finds himself as the hotel security guard. As the civil war intensifies and creeps nearer to the capital, Adam gives Abdel to the army to regain his job and finds himself agonizing over his decision, especially after Abdel's pregnant girlfriend turns up at their house. As time goes by Adam becomes increasingly unstable, finally resolving to rescue his son from the military and embarking on a journey with tragic consequences.

A Screaming Man forms the third part of Haroun's triptych looking at father-son relationships and, indirectly, Chad's violent past. Recently interviewed for the BFI's Sight and Sound, Mahamat Saleh Haroun suggested that he wants to show how the relationship between fathers and sons has engendered war after war in his homeland, stressing the importance of breaking this chain of transmission where fathers are prepared to send their sons to fight. However, this is not at all to suggest that Haroun tries to shy away from addressing Chad's problems in his film. In the same interview, he bemoans the tendency of some African directors to show the positive side of life in Africa whilst people live hard lives and face insurmountable problems on a daily basis. In A Screaming Man the war is rendered discretely, as a backdrop to Adam and Abdul's relationship; it is the sound of helicopters passing, soldiers in the streets, dubious radio broadcasts announcing government victories. Haroun still manages to say more about the war than most conventional war films could manage.

When he was only 18, Haroun was shot during the second civil war, and consequently left his homeland looking for opportunities elsewhere. After wandering across the world doing odd jobs to support himself, Haroun eventually settled in Bordeaux, where he worked as a journalist, eventually deciding to go into cinema. Even after he started directing films he chose to remain based in France. The director claims that it is his ability to see Chad as a Chadian and an outsider that has allowed him to give such a piercing insight in the 'fathers' triptych. He has also looked on as an outsider as one of his fondest memories of Chad - its cinemas where he used to watch Bollywood films and Spaghetti Westerns as a child - has disappeared. It was during the rules of Hissène Habré that the Vogue, the Rio, the Schéhérezade and the Normandie all closed down, and the disappearance of cinema from Chad was the backdrop to his debut feature film Bye Bye Africa, 1999.

In an interview to a French online newspaper, Haroun was pleased to say that the situation in Chad has improved since he filmed Daratt – this time filming was uninterrupted by the war; when filming Daratt, Haroun and his crew were pinned down by attacking rebel forces and were unable to leave for several days. In spite of this and the hints of a possible renaissance of cinema in his homeland, Mahamat Saleh Haroun has said that he intends to stay in France for work reasons- almost all of his funding comes from French and other European sources and he has been able to meet a network of other African directors living in the city. Abderrahmane Sissako, the Malian director of Bamako, produced Daratt after the two met in Paris, and Haroun has now said that he would like to start a collective for filmmakers from Africa in Paris. The reopening of the Normandie aside, Haroun thinks that the collective is the only way to bring about a true revolution in African cinema; 'You can make excellent movies alone and become a good artist. But if you are a group and you make good movies, you can create a wave.'

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