



Difret
Director: Zeresenay Berhane Mehari
Country: Ethiopia
Date: 2014



This midweek season is supported by Film Hub North West Central, proud to be part of the BFI Film Audience Network.

An interview with the film's producer from *Vogue* magazine:

A number of internationally acclaimed visual artists these days are deeply engaged with social issues. Julie Mehretu, who was born in Ethiopia and lives in New York City, is one of them. She was so struck by the true story of a 14-year-old Ethiopian victim of the ancient and cruel tradition of marriage-by-abduction that she sold a major painting to finance and produce *Difret*, a powerful and moving film based on the girl's experience. Mehretu, who is currently working to make the issue of abduction a U.S. foreign policy priority, spoke with *Vogue.com* about helping to make the film, which premieres in New York City on October 23.



How did you get involved with *Difret* and what was your part?

[Director Zeresenay Berhane] Mehari sent me the script for *Difret*, which I was blown away by. The word *difret* means "courage" in Amharic, and I actually thought what they were trying to do with this film was courageous. I didn't know Mehari's work as a filmmaker, only that the script was incredibly powerful and the film had to exist. I sold a work from my collection to help raise the budget for it. The film itself was better than any of us could have imagined. It is a beautiful film, made in Ethiopia, that can stand shoulder to shoulder with many other great films in global cinema. Since then I have been involved in trying to help *Difret* reach the widest possible audience.

Have you ever been involved with filmmaking before?

I haven't, and it was fascinating to be part of a creative project of this scope and ambition. Mehari is committed to film as a medium, an art form, so he made *Difret* in actual photochemical film, not digitally, even though that would have been by far the easiest solution. They were shooting in Amharic, on location in the Ethiopian countryside, and had to send daily rushes of the film to India for processing. Those facilities just don't exist in Ethiopia—this, alongside the myriad obstacles and political realities of making a film in Ethiopia. It was a privilege to be a part of this in some way, to witness them work. They're among the new African modernists, and have been such an inspiration to me.

What was it about this story that made you want to commit to it?

To start with, *Difret* is a story of Ethiopia, where I'm from, but much more so, it sets an example of how even the most deep-rooted cultural traditions can be transformed from within. It's essentially a story of homegrown Ethiopian heroism by two women who challenge the longstanding practice of forced child marriage. It's an important story and an example, a model in a sense, of bravery and the will to effect change. Even though this tradition of *telefa* (abduction for marriage) is constitutionally illegal, it is still being practiced by over 50 percent of the country today. It's a human-rights crisis that needs global support and advocacy. I understood that the challenges of making a film like *Difret* are immense. There are endless barriers to getting stories like this one out into the world—intimate stories of African women and girls. It makes it all the more important to support independent African filmmakers like Mehari, who are telling stories from their own perspective from within their home countries. I was committed to helping make this film happen in any way I could.

What changes have come about because of the film, and where?

Difret brilliantly captures one of the most profound and epic achievements in the struggle for the human rights of women and girls in Africa, and as a result it has brought attention to the issue of child marriage and the violent conditions under which it occurs. The State Department began to address the issue in 2013, but

the release of an Adolescent Girls Strategy has been stalled. The petition connected to Difret has accelerated the release of this strategy thanks to the over 144,000 signatories we gathered.

How did Angelina Jolie Pitt become a part of this film, and what is she doing?

After the film was finished and Mehari began submitting it to festivals, I thought, 'This film really needs its own ambassador in the world. Angelina Jolie came to mind, because the story could have easily been the story of her daughter from Ethiopia. It could be the story of any girl from Ethiopia. We sent her the film and she was immediate in her response. She is an ardent and fierce political advocate for women and against such forms of violence. She seemed completely taken by the film and its artistry and wanted to take it on. She generously put her name on it as a presenter and executive producer, and her team has been instrumental in supporting Mehari as an independent Ethiopian filmmaker. They worked diligently to support the film's inclusion in festivals and the like.

How did it come to the Obamas' attention?

Secretary [of State John] Kerry had mentioned it in his public remarks last year at the summit to end sexual violence, and numerous advocacy groups have brought the film to the attention of the First Lady's office.

One of the striking things about the film is how completely professional it is, much more so than you'd expect with a budget of only \$750,000. Could you tell us something about the director and the principal actors?

The director has a particular and unique background. He was born and raised in Ethiopia and came to the U.S. to attend USC film school. He worked in Hollywood for 10 years after graduating, and traveled back and forth between L.A. and Ethiopia looking for stories. He was intent on finding an Ethiopian story for his debut, and in particular wanted a story that would begin to show the dramatic changes the country was experiencing, a film that would begin to change the conversation about Ethiopia and Africa more broadly. Difret became that film. The majority of the actors are first-time actors, but some were also professionally trained. For example, Meron Getnet, who plays the role of Meaza, is a revered film and TV star in Ethiopia. Her background and training is in theater arts.

Are you interested in doing other films, or maybe making one yourself?

As a painter, my practice and work are very internal. It's a solitary practice and form of making. But I've always been very engaged, politically, with the world, and I've tried in what ways I can to participate in more direct forms of action. As much as I can, I've sought ways to leverage what has come to me through my work to support projects that have a real and substantial engagement with, an impact on, the issues I care about deeply. Difret is among those projects.

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