

FILM REVIEWS

FEATURE FILMS

Mahamat-Saleh Haroun. *A Screaming Man*. Original title: *Un homme qui crie*. 2010. Chad and France. French and Chadian Arabic, with English subtitles. 91 min. Film Movement and Pyramide International. \$24.95.

A Screaming Man, Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's fourth feature film after *Bye Bye Africa* (1999), *Abouna* (2002), and *Daratt* (2006), was widely shown and distributed after winning the Jury Prize at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival. Although Haroun has lived in France for thirty years, he chose to set all four films in his native Chad: "If I stopped making them, you would never see images of Chad.... This view of the world, from this country where there aren't film-makers, is very important I think. So, I do it through solidarity and because I feel a responsibility not to leave this country invisible" (in Alexandra Topping, "Mahamat Saleh Haroun Brings Chad to the World, and Vice Versa, through Film," *The Guardian*, Feb. 25, 2013). The success of *A Screaming Man* led the government of Chad to fund a film for the first time, Haroun's *Gris-Gris* (2013) which, like *Abouna* and *A Screaming Man*, was shown in competition at Cannes. The Chadian government has also agreed to open a film school in N'Djamena, which will be run by the filmmaker Issa Serge Coelo.

The main characters of *Abouna* and *Daratt* are children hurt by the absence of their fathers. The protagonist of *A Screaming Man* is a father whose presence ultimately destroys his son. Adam, a winner in his youth of the Central African Swimming Championships and still nicknamed "Champion" in his mid-fifties, has passed his expertise as a swim instructor and hotel pool supervisor on to his son, Abdel, only to see Abdel replace him when the N'Djamena hotel where they work is bought by a Chinese owner who downsizes the staff. Demoted to guard at the hotel gate, Adam experiences a twofold struggle. His identity, from competitive swimmer to *maître nageur*, has been constructed around the swimming pool from which he has been evicted. And Abdel's willingness to accept their boss's offer to supplant him leads Adam in turn to betray his son, with far more dire consequences. Adam stops the payments to the army that have thus far spared Abdel from being drafted to fight in Chad's brutal and unending civil war, and the film remains ambiguous about whether this is an act of financial or psychological desperation. Abdel is

wounded in the fighting and dies in the sidecar of his father's motorcycle after Adam sneaks him out of the barracks to take him home.

A Screaming Man, an intimate portrait of an African family in the midst of an African civil war, avoids all stereotypes (both those derived from non-African sources and from Africa itself) of the African continent, its people, or its film. Haroun's Chad, for better or for worse, is neither remote nor isolated; Adam shares his swimming pool with his fellow employees, the new owner, Madame Wang, and a number of French tourists and military personnel. Haroun has said that his films portray small families in order to get away from what he has called the "folklore of the collective," and his goal is not "to record the life and customs of people" but instead "to show transgressions, things that aren't usually found in life" (Vincent Malausa, "Un cinéaste tchadien: Entretien avec Mahamat-Saleh Haroun," *Cahiers du cinéma* 660 [2010]:43; Suzy Gillett, "Shadow of the Father," *Sight and Sound* 21.6 [2011]). The war in Chad remains in the background for much of the film; the film is about the civil war between father and son and the emotional and economic dilemmas of Adam that eventually engulf his family and propel the family into a crisis that is equally personal and political.

The title of Haroun's film is drawn from the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, written more than twenty years before Chad gained its independence from France: "And above all, my body as well as my soul, beware of assuming the sterile attitude of a spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of miseries is not a proscenium, a screaming man is not a dancing bear" (Canto 30). Like Abderrahmane Sissako in his 1998 *Life on Earth*, Haroun uses Césaire's words to warn his audiences, wherever they may be located, that watching from a comfortable distance is never enough. Haroun's sense of solidarity and responsibility manifests itself here in an extraordinary film, one that is resolutely African in content and focus but at the same time appeals to international film audiences. Richard Brody, writing in the *The New Yorker*, claims that *A Screaming Man* was inspired by the German filmmaker F. W. Murnau's 1924 *The Last Laugh*, in which another aging hotel employee loses a cherished position that is essential to his sense of self (http://www.newyorker.com/arts/reviews/film/a_screaming_man_haroun). It seems more accurate to speak of resonance rather than inspiration with respect to Murnau, but Haroun has over the years acknowledged a wide range of favorite filmmakers and influences, including Charlie Chaplin, Abbas Kiarostami, Takeshi Kitano, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Yasujiro Ozu, Idrissa Ouedraogo, Robert Bresson, Roberto Rossellini, and Wim Wenders. As Haroun brings cinema to Chad and Chad to cinema, he expects to participate fully in world cinema as an African filmmaker. Rather than insist on African specificity and difference, he assumes that the stories he has to tell can be both universal and geographically and historically specific.

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