

EUROPA

DIRECTED BY HAIDER RASHID



EUROPA

A FILM BY
HAIDER RASHID

IRAQ, ITALY, KUWAIT / 2021 / 72' / ENGLISH, ARABIC, BULGARIAN

WITH

ADAM ALI, SVETLANA YANTCHEVA, PIETRO CICIRIELLO, GASSID MOHAMMED, MOHAMED ZOUAOU, ERFAN RASHID

SYNOPSIS

KAMAL HAS FLED IRAQ TO TRY TO ENTER «FORTRESS EUROPE». AT THE TURKISH-BULGARIAN BORDER, LOCAL MERCENARIES ARE RUTHLESSLY HUNTING DOWN MIGRANTS. ALONE IN THE FOREST, KAMAL HAS THREE DAYS TO ESCAPE.

PRODUCED BY

RADICAL PLANS, IN ASSOCIATION WITH BEYOND DREAMS AND FAIR PLAY

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BAGHDAD FILM FUND - IRAQI MINISTRY OF CULTURE, MIC - ITALIAN MINISTRY OF CULTURE, TOSCANA FILM COMMISSION,
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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The issue of identity and migration have always been a part of my life and my family, the sense of displacement and sometimes not belonging is a feeling I am familiar with. This film was born out of these feelings and out of the fear for the future, at a time in history when xenophobic propaganda has seeped heavily not just in politics, but into everyday discourse.

The film is based on real events happening on the so-called “Balkan Route”, where migrants are smuggled into Europe across the Turkish border and are often subject to violence, intimidation and illegal pushback. The goal was to create an immersive experience that could create questions in the audience’s mind, testing their definition of empathy, as a character of whom they know very little of tries to survive and remain a human being during his horrific journey.

The plight of migrants entering Europe has been a centrepiece of international news for years now, but I wanted to go beyond the sense of distance that I often find in the telling of these stories. I feel that this distance can be shorter, almost non-present, in the case of a fiction film in which a character is almost always alone, fighting against his surroundings, his attackers and ultimately himself. The goal was to portray what is a tough, inhumane experience in the most realistic and visceral way possible; breathing, living, and fighting with a resilient but nonetheless suffering character who, with his small, almost minuscule story, represents the struggles of many.

While the film focuses strongly on realism and an intimate approach to the character, immersing the audience with a sense of presence, to me it holds a deeply symbolic nature as well: being an immigrant or a descendent of immigrants in Europe today, can often feel a lot like being lost in a wild forest, where friends are few and foes are many.



DIRECTOR'S INTERVIEW

Can you tell us about your career as a director?

My first time on a film set was as a child, about 9 or 10 years old. My father Erfan Rashid, who is a journalist and director, was directing a TV show and asked me to act for him. I spent months soaking in the atmosphere, which of course was strange and amazing for a kid. I spent the summer vacations of my teenage years following my father around film festivals and cultural events and became his camera operator for the many interviews he made for TVs around the world.

My interest grew in being behind the camera and I started writing some scripts and experimenting. I made shorts with my high school friends and then moved to London to study film, but soon dropped out of school. At the age of 23 I wrote, directed and produced my first film “Tangled Up in Blue”, set in London, about the son of a well-known Iraqi writer coping with his estranged father’s death in Baghdad. The film premiered in Dubai and traveled to a couple of dozen festivals throughout the world.

Dubai was an amazing hub for Arab or Arab-descent filmmakers, together with its other yearly event, the Gulf Film Festival. I learned a lot and felt welcomed by the Arab film community, something that was very heartwarming for me, having always had a deep fascination with my origins. Being able to be part of this passionate community gave me the opportunity to grow as a filmmaker. After directing a music documentary called “Silence: All Roads Lead to Music”, I moved back to Italy and set up my production company Radical Plans. In 2013 I produced my second fiction feature called “Sta Per Piovere” and “Street Opera”, which premiered at the Rome Film Festival.

How would you present Europa in a few words ?

In cinematic terms it’s an immersive thriller with a conscience, in that it shows the horrific reality of hundreds of thousands of people who have traveled across the Balkan Route through the hands of inhumane smugglers and State and non-State forces. Everything that happens in the film is based on reality; it has either been told to us by first-hand account during research and scouting, or it is taken from reports by the most prominent human-rights organizations. But it is first and foremost a human story of survival of a young and resilient man in search for a better life.

How did you come up with the idea for the film ?

Around the time I finished “Street Opera”, VR was making a comeback and it seemed that this current iteration was here to stay. I started tinkering with the technology, experimenting with shooting in 360 degrees and utilizing immersive sound. There wasn’t nearly as much technology to make VR work as there is today and the fun part during that time was inventing solutions to face the technical challenges.

One thing I was sure about though was that the best use of VR for me wouldn’t just be as a gimmick to instigate a “wow effect”; I believed it was extremely important to put it to good narrative use in order to be effective. That’s when I had the idea for “No Borders”. I wanted to immerse the audience in self-run reception centers for migrants in Rome and Ventimiglia, on the border with France, to show people the struggles that these young women and men were facing in traveling across the country.

At the same time I was being affected by hearing stories of people - sometimes teenagers on their own - crossing borders to reach Europe; it not only informed me as a citizen, but also recalled stories and memories of my family. In reading, discussing and studying more and more, I came across what was happening on the eastern border of Europe, on the so-called “Balkan Route”, where migrants were being hunted by so-called “migrant hunters”.

That’s when I got the idea for EUROPA: I wanted to take everything I had learned from VR and bring it back into a theater and a linear film, allowing the audience to be with the character, close to him, sometimes breathing with him. The sound was a big part of the idea: I wanted sound effects and atmospheres to move and rotate on the 360° sound sphere according to the movements of the camera. The title came together with the idea, one could not live without the other.

Can you tell us more about the film’s development?

I was reading a lot about real-life experiences of migrants crossing the border between Turkey and Bulgaria and started discussing it with some colleagues, friends and family. It seemed like the concept for the film was strong and it was a challenge, both artistically and in terms of production, which of course made it even more fascinating to me.

Interestingly, Bulgaria is the country where my father arrived in Europe, when he fled from Iraq in 1978, at a time when Saddam Hussein’s regime was hunting down dissidents, arresting them and often torturing and killing them. Although his journey was different from the one EUROPA’s protagonist embarks on, it somehow felt even more right to tell this story. I wrote the first draft of the script in about five or six nights in a very visceral manner. That gave me the initial structure for the story and the character.



It was clear to me that I had to use genre elements in the structure and pacing of the story. I was set on avoiding any kind of rhetoric and pietism and believed that the key to doing this was to focus closely on the character, both narratively and in terms of camerawork. I wanted the audience to know enough about the character to feel empathy towards him, yet as little as possible so this wouldn't just be a story about one person, but about the many who went through this horrifying experience, sometimes without making it.

I also knew that the film had to be fairly contained as it pushes and provokes the audience on many fronts. The goal for both Sonia Giannetto, my co-writer and I was to create an experience that would envelop the viewers with a strong sense of presence. I traveled to Bulgaria and thanks to producer Ivan Tonev I was able to meet people on the ground - migrants, former public officials, human rights lawyers - and I visited the forest and the area where the story took place. There, I understood that the story I'd written was very realistic, but there were darker and more gruesome sides to it.

How did you choose your main actor?

Regarding the main role, Kamal, I was set on finding an actor who could understand the sense of displacement that we wanted to portray on an emotional level. My colleague Daniele Bernabei ran into a trailer for a short film while at the Short Film Corner in Cannes and sent it to me, as the cast was composed of several Arab actors. As soon as I saw Adam Ali I felt there was something interesting about him, a silent movie face in a way. That made me want to find out more, since we were going to make a film in which dialogue is at a minimum and most of the film is on the protagonist's shoulders.

While he was in Canada shooting Apple+'s "Little America, we had a very interesting conversation and found some common grounds on certain issues like the misrepresentation of certain ethnicities in film and TV and what it feels like to be sometimes torn between two cultures. Adam is of Libyan origins and moved with his family to Manchester when he was a child, so the issue of identity was also a common ground between us.

Of course this film is pretty different as it is so physical and it was clear that we were going to do many things that not every actor would be willing to do. While speaking to Adam, it seemed to me that there was a certain pride about him that would help me in pushing him in certain directions both physically and emotionally by sometimes provoking him. He was great in being determined to do what was necessary and I have to say he was really brave in how he faced the physical and emotional challenges that the story entailed.



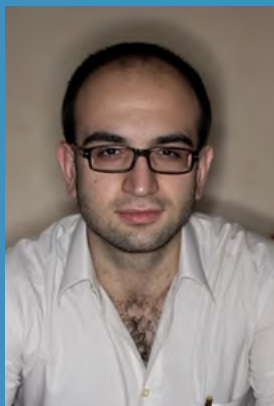
How did the shooting go, was it challenging?

The shooting took place in July 2019 in Tuscany. We tried to keep the crew and equipment to a minimum given the logistical difficulties, but it is still hard to move thirty people through a forest without getting hurt. I'm happy to say that, amazingly, nobody did.

Initially we were set on shooting the film in the Strandhza forest in Bulgaria, but we were tied to Italy by financing. We spent several weeks scouting locations through Tuscany so that we could find one that matched the original forest. We were lucky to find a place that is virtually identical in terms of terrain, trees and plants. Our budget tied us to an 18-day long shoot, which was extremely challenging for such a location.

I believe it would have been much harder to make certain choices had I not produced the film myself, as the risks for everyone involved were many on a daily basis. Despite being mid-July, we were hit by a huge storm on the first day of production, which was the most complicated and most expensive as we had many extras, stunts, animals, and we were pretty much in the middle of nowhere. We had to cancel the first day, which felt like a bad omen for the film, but we pooled together and re-worked our production plan. The following three weeks were difficult, but we were all well aware of the privilege we had in making this film, and the more time we spent in the forest, the more all of us disconnected from the outside world and reality. I believe this seeped into the film. It was a formative, humbling and unique experience for the whole crew.

BIOGRAPHIES



HAIDER RASHID was born in 1985 of mixed Iraqi and Italian origins. He has directed features TANGLED UP IN BLUE (2010), SILENCE: ALL ROADS LEAD TO MUSIC (2011), IT'S ABOUT TO RAIN (2013) and STREET OPERA (2015), the short film THE DEEP (2013) and NO BORDERS (2016), Italy's first VR film. His films have won awards at Venice Film Festival, Dubai International Film Festival and the Nastri d'Argento award ceremony.

2021 : EUROPA

2016 : No Borders (cm / short)

2015 : Street Opera (doc)

2013 : The Deep (cm / short)

2013 : Sta per piovere

2011 : Silence: All Roads Lead to Music (doc)

2009 : Tangled Up in Blue



ADAM ALI is a British Libyan actor and director striving to celebrate queer Muslim visibility. Growing up in Manchester, he trained at Television Workshop Salford where he took part in improv workshops and learning about naturalism. This was where his passion for acting began. He recently received a Film Independent Spirit Award nomination for his performance as 'Zain' in the season finale of Apple TV's 'Little America'. Directed by NBC's Queer As Folk reboot director Stephen Dunn, Adam starred alongside Haaz Sleiman as they told the story of a gay Syrian refugee who dreams of being openly gay. Commissioned by British Council's 'More Films For Freedom', Adam and Sam Arbor co-created "BABA", a short which is inspired by Libya's embryonic underground LGBT community. It premiered at BFI Flare Film Festival.

2021 : EUROPA (Actor)

2021 : BABA (Director / Short)

2021 : EXPIATION (Actor / Short)

2020 : LITTLE AMERICA (Actor / TV series)

2019 : BLIND (Actor / Short)



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