



PILI FILMS PRESENT

**A SEASON** ERIQ EBOUANEY  
SANDRINE BONNAIRE **IN FRANCE**

A FILM BY MAHAMAT-SALEH HAROUN

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PILI FILMS PRESENT

# A SEASON IN FRANCE

A FILM BY MAHAMAT-SALEH HAROUN

2017 / FRANCE / COLOR / 1.85 / 5.1 / 97' / FRENCH

## SYNOPSIS

Abbas, a high school teacher in the Central African Republic, has fled his war-torn country with his two children. They now live in France, where Abbas works at a food market, while applying for political asylum.

A French woman, Carole, falls in love with him and offers a roof for him and his family. When Abbas' application is rejected, they face a crucial decision.





## INTERVIEW WITH MAHAMAT-SALEH HAROUN

### *Why did you choose to set this film in Paris?*

Because I've lived in France for quite some time now, and instead of continuing to relay what is happening in Africa I felt it was time to question the memory of exile that is being forged here and to show faces that one doesn't often get to see in mainstream cinema. So I thought back over that tragic event that took place in the autumn of 2014 when a Chadian asylum seeker set fire to himself at the CNDA (Cour nationale du droit d'asile / National Court for the Right of Asylum) in Montreuil, near Paris, because his request for asylum had been turned down. He suffered severe burns, but didn't die in the attempt.

The refugee tales we tend to hear are those of crossing the desert or the seas, in short, the "spectacular" side of the migrant odyssey. But once they have arrived here and have filed their request for asylum they tend to "blend in", as the administrative process is a long one. They don't look like refugees, they look just like me. And when, having been uprooted from their native land and done their best to carve out a little place for themselves here, they then receive a negative response from the authorities, it's as if they have been uprooted twice over. It comes as a violent blow. Most of them decide to remain underground, as illegal immigrants. Due to the fact that it imposes a long period of inertia and provisional settling, as it were, the system ends up manufacturing illegal immigrants. That's one of the key issues: how to process demands faster, so that in case of a negative answer refugees can try to go elsewhere?



### ***Why is Abbas, your hero, not Chadian?***

I chose to make Abbas a refugee from the Central African Republic for the sake of topicality: it's a country that is in difficulty, violence is still ongoing there, the civil war is not over. And it's a country that is closely bound to France historically: think of the Bokassa diamonds scandal, of Operation Sangaris. Like many French-speaking African countries, it's a nation that was simply invented: France gave it a name, borders, a currency and a language... As Étienne says to Abbas in the movie, Africa is a total fiction. A fiction that nonetheless physically exists, as it was built.

Hence, the manner in which France treats Abbas is all the more unjust. I cut one scene in which we learn that Abbas's grandfather had served in the French army and had even died in France. Abbas is a French teacher, France is genuinely his second home. And language is a very strong bond between people, far stronger than the colour of one's skin.

### ***In the news, there is a lot of talk of Syrian refugees, but less mention of those from Central Africa...***

Yes, there is a kind of refugee hierarchy, almost a "fashion". There are those whose reason and need for leaving their country is widely known to the general public... But what drives Central Africans from their country is less well known, they are not on the media radar, their problems are given less consideration. I'm not accusing anyone, but that's what I've observed. There are 400,000 refugees from the Central African Republic in Chad. I've visited their camps; they have fled appalling violence. No one flees their country with a smile on their face.

### ***We understand during the burial scene that Abbas is Muslim. What does this bring to the narrative?***

It shows that a Muslim, Abbas, and a Christian, Étienne, can be bound by a strong friendship. The civil war in the Central African Republic is also a war of religion. But most likely Abbas and Étienne have taught in the same school, their relationship is a very long-standing one, a friendship of locality, of neighbourhood, as is often the case in Africa. Shooting this scene in the Thiais cemetery in Paris, in the Garden of Brotherhood, formerly called the "paupers plot", I felt that the Republic was finally showing through in the course of a lay ceremony: it was welcoming the dead. Yet not for long, as the graveyard concessions are of limited duration...

***What likely path had Abbas taken prior to the commencement of the film?***

He had fled the Central African Republic with his wife and children – his wife was killed along the way. He had most likely come through Chad and thanks to his links with France managed to obtain a tourist visa and to come to Paris. Upon his arrival he filed for refugee status via OFPRA (Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides), and then, having met with a refusal, appealed to the CNDA (Cour nationale du droit d’asile / National Court for the Right of Asylum). The response time can be quite long and in the meantime he has become an “ordinary” citizen, as it were, having found casual employment and managing to send his children to school. Fortunately, in France, there is still a humanist strain, a generosity, and militants working behind the scenes to help such refugees, who may appear to be socially integrated, but who suffer an inner turmoil that is far more complex to grasp. I knew from the start that the film would unfold during the three months of winter, in the course of a “*Season in France*”, as the title suggests – the three final months of Abbas’s waiting for a final answer. I didn’t want to put a face to the administration, because to show is already to judge, and I didn’t want to portray Abbas doing battle with any given body. There is no interface, no office, no civil servants against whom to rant and rail. There are simply the letters, the merciless correspondence. I wanted to capture that process whereby the individual is erased from the public arena, the ordeal of his or her ongoing disintegration. Thinking of his children’s future enables Abbas to hang on in there, yet Étienne is alone and hence more fragile. Even though he seems more joyful and easy-going, it’s just an outer shell. As they say in Chad: “So as not to cry, men show their teeth...”.

***As of the very moving opening scene, where Abbas takes Asma into his bed and sings her a lullaby, one feels the particular attention you give to faces...***

I think it was Russell Banks who said that faces are like landscapes. One can read on a person’s face what they bear within, their pain, their trauma. I wanted, metaphorically speaking, to show the weather of these faces, the wind, the rain, the snow... And little by little Abbas’s entire body begins to speak, the situation is eating him up from within, he is a giant who begins to teeter. Out of the lullaby looms the ghost who prevents all appeasement: that is the refugee’s tragedy, the ghosts that haunt them, who stop them from finding serenity, from settling somewhere. The song was written in Sango, by Bibi Tanga, a Central African musician, who plays Étienne. He likes the piece so much, he’s going to include on his next record. Later on in the film, we hear the lullaby sung by Carole, played by Sandrine Bonnaire: curiously, it was only in the course of shooting that I realized that she was taking up where the mother left off. And even the original sound track by Wasis Diop has something of the lullaby about it. These lullabies tell something from a certain past, a memory, a lost territory...

***Carole herself stems from an older wave of immigration...***

Her parents came from Poland and although it must have been tough at times, they managed to integrate over time. Perhaps their assimilation was somewhat easier in that it was different from the current wave of immigration, insofar as they didn’t wear their foreignness on their faces, simply in their names. Yet Carole carries that memory of immigration within her. She feels French, of course, but her heritage re-emerges out of solidarity with those who are undergoing what her own parents went through.





***Both Abbas and Étienne are fortunate to find protective companions...***

But to turn the page, they need to be at peace, whereas they are people on reprieve, who are awaiting a final judgement. Not knowing what tomorrow will be made of undermines all possibility of building something long-term. If they commit beyond a certain limit, and if tomorrow they have to up stakes and leave, they know they will be putting their companion in a painful situation. And they don't want that. Such lack of certainty even goes so far as to strip them of their masculinity.

***How come you thought of Sandrine Bonnaire?***

I feel that her smile – which to my mind is the prettiest smile in France – has accompanied me since my coming here in 1982. I discovered her, of course, in the films of Pialat, and always dreamt of working with her. I'd like to have done so sooner! What's more, she carries a part of the Chadian tradition within her, as she played in Raymond Depardon's *Captive of the Desert*, loosely based on the kidnapping of Françoise Claustre... Together, we talked a lot about Carole's possible family, her parents' past.

***Eriq Ebouaney brings an impressive physical presence to the character of Abbas...***

I'd wanted to work with him for a long time. He's a very fine actor. I remember talking to Brian de Palma about him at the Toronto Film Festival. He'd used him in *Femme Fatale* and again in his next movie. Eriq and I also talked a lot about the character. I had him read accounts written by people who'd experienced a similar ordeal. *Manuel d'exil* by the Bosnian, Velibor Colic, the cartoon strip, *Petit manuel du parfait réfugié politique*, by the Iranian Mana Neyestani, and lastly, *Journal d'un réfugié politique*, by the Chadian, Ahmat Zéidane Bichara. All of which helped to flesh out the character. Eriq is from Cameroon, but can easily pass off as a Central African.

***And the idea of having Bibi Tanga play Étienne?***

I'm convinced that musicians, given that they are constantly in tempo, are often potentially good actors: acting is a matter of rhythm. And the history of cinema has proved that. Bibi does a kind of urban music, similar to afro-jazz. Yet even though he lives in Paris, he is well known in Bangui, and it was important to have a genuine Central African on board. It reassured me to have his opinion on the screenplay. He was very touched by the story. And there is another musician in the film, the Cameroonian jazz singer Sandra Nkaké. She plays Abbas's wife, who returns to him in his dreams. I find her very moving, especially in the last scene where she caresses her husband's head. She has a gentleness and sensuality about her that really touches me. As for Léonie Simaga, who plays Martine, Étienne's girlfriend, she's from Mali and was a long-standing member of La Comédie-Française. She puts an extraordinary energy and intelligence into her acting. The subtlety with which she would redo each scene, making new suggestions each time, just blew me away. A great actress.

***When writing the screenplay did you already have a certain complementarity between the children in mind? The extroverted little sister, the more reserved older brother?***

No. I first chose this little eight-year-old girl from Cameroon, who literally cannot sit still. She even says so herself: "I need to let off steam!"... I then came across this eleven-year-old boy who I felt had a great intensity in his gaze. I thought that the tandem would work well. To preserve his genuine nature, I tried to not have him talk too much. And something else, which wasn't planned in the screenplay, I felt he could write his family's history in the present and thus entrusted him with the voiceover/narration. Very often in refugee situations, it is the first generation who undergoes the ordeal, but it is the second generation who recounts it.

***Between the two children there are some very touching gestures and exchanges of tenderness...***

This affection, this love they share is all that have left. Indeed, it's the only thing we cannot take away from them. At times of great deprivation, the slightest gesture of affection, little gifts, have a power beyond measure. When Étienne offers Martine a papaya, there is an upsurge of emotion, of heightened sensuality even. I cut the dialogue where she explains that the fruit reminded her of her father, acting like a kind of Proustian madeleine. Just like the gifts that Carole receives, be they as simple as a children's drawing, such things will be all these women are left with from these people. Vestiges of fragile moments of happiness, the only memory of those vanished without trace. There is a kind of violence done to such people who become attached to refugees when the latter are obliged to continue on their path. The documentary film *Doulaye, une saison des pluies*, by Henri-François Imbert came to mind, a film in which the narrator heads off in search of a Malian neighbour of whom he suddenly has no news. What will Carole do with the books, the goldfish, the memories of this life of passage?

***The birthday scene, filmed in static shot, and relatively long, is one of the only moments where the characters genuinely live the present moment together...***

Given the rarity and fragility of the moment I wanted to draw out the sequence as much as I could, asking the actors to improvise. Even the kids did a great job! The duration brings a veracity to the sequence which I really like. We location scouted Carole's apartment with its big bow window in Bobigny (a north eastern suburb of Paris), in a large estate built in the 70s. These apartments are quite special, insofar as they integrate the residents into the city, and at night that takes on quite a distinctive cachet...



***Indeed, in topographical terms, the film portrays a very particular side of Paris, industrial landscapes that lie between the city and its suburbs...***

I wanted to talk about that margin of the city, the Paris that we don't get to see. I didn't want to play on the contrast between the beauty of the city and the situation of the refugees. I was looking more for places that served as refuges. In the course of the location scouting, when we were looking for a location to build Étienne's hut, we came across veritable "woodsmen", people who had come from Eastern Europe, who had built houses out in the woods, while waiting for their immigration requests to be dealt with and formalised. Just like Abbas and Étienne, who are aware of their own deprivation, there is a desire not to show oneself, to hide in a geographical no man's land which mirrors the legal no man's land in which they find themselves...



***Did you film inside the real CNDA (Cour nationale du droit d'asile / National Court for the Right of Asylum)?***

No, the traumatic immolation episode was still fresh in their memories, and they didn't want to have to relive it. So we built a faithful set reproduction. But I have been there several times, I've witnessed its Babel-like atmosphere, the mix of people from every continent. The extras in the scene are genuine asylum seekers, sent to us by refugee aid associations. There is even a couple from Aleppo, the veiled woman and her praying husband. I decided to let the camera linger on these faces, each one bearing witness to individual tragedy.

***Does the Police raid on Carole's apartment echo a hardening of the immigration policy of the French authorities?***

Yes, the law calls for the punishment of those who help illegal immigrants. We had the example earlier in the year of a French farmer who was tried for having taken migrants across the Italian border. They are often Prefectural directives: whether to increasingly reprimand the "crime of solidarity" or not? It depends on the Prefectures. Some are reasonably clement, others are not... There's no real knowing why.

***Why this ending in Calais?***

Because Carole doesn't know where to go, and Calais is the place where many found refuge or asylum. But when she gets there, the "jungle" has already been dismantled. There's nothing left. We shot these scenes in October, before the shoot per se got underway, to take advantage of this emptiness. Few people filmed it, because after all, TV cameras prefer the spectacle. All that remained were traces of those fleeting lives. The idea was to dovetail, as it were, the individual journey of Abbas and his children into a broader, collective odyssey...

***In the end, Abbas does not appeal the decision of the administrative tribunal, he gives up the fight...***

He is overcome by a kind of self-weariness, of weariness with the system. He throws in the towel, yet in his final letter there is a ray of hope... "As long as we keep on walking, a star will shine for us..." Which brings me back to some African beliefs, such as the idea that every human being has his or her star, and that shooting stars are lives that are ending. It's a bit like the culmination of Truffaut's *400 Blows: the tale ends in emptiness*, Carole has reached an impasse. Thus, another story can begin. And I'm proud that the tone of the film's telling is that of the chronicle, without over-dramatization of the peripheral events – Étienne's desperate act, for example, is in no way foretold. No artifice, no artificial narrative construction... I prefer to respect the intelligence of the viewer.



## MAHAMAT-SALEH HAROUN

Selective Filmography

- 2017** **A SEASON IN FRANCE** / TIFF - *Special Presentations*
- 2016** **HISSEIN HABRÉ, A CHADIAN TRAGEDY** / *Documentary*  
Cannes - *Out of Competition* - *Special screening*
- 2013** **GRISGRIS** / Cannes - *Competition*
- 2010** **A SCREAMING MAN** / Cannes - *Jury Prize*
- 2006** **DARATT (DRY SEASON)** / Venice - *Special Jury Prize*
- 2002** **ABOUNA (OUR FATHER)** / Cannes - *Director's Fortnight*
- 1999** **BYE BYE AFRICA (documentary)** / Venice - *Best First Film*

## CAST

ABBAS  
CAROLE  
ASMA  
YACINE  
ÉTIENNE  
MARTINE  
RÉGINE  
THAMMA  
POLICEMAN 1  
POLICEMAN 2  
MAN IN THE CEMETARY  
With the participation of

Eriq EBOUANEY  
Sandrine BONNAIRE  
Aalayna LYS  
Ibrahim BURAMA DARBOE  
Bibi TANGA  
Léonie SIMAGA  
Régine CONAS  
Khampha THAMMAVONGSA  
Stéphane MALASSENET  
Nathan DELLEMME  
Marius YELOLO  
Sandra NKAKE as MADELEINE

## CREW

Director  
Script  
Director of photography  
1<sup>er</sup> Assistant Director  
Production Designer  
Costume Designer  
Sound  
Editor  
Original Score  
Script Supervisor  
Production Manager  
Location Manager  
Casting Director

Mahamat-Saleh HAROUN  
Mahamat-Saleh HAROUN  
Mathieu GIOMBINI  
François CHAILLOU  
Éric BARBOZA  
Agnès NODEN  
Dana FARZANEHPOUR  
Jean-François ÉLIE  
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