

A Season in France

(Une Saison en France)

A film by
Mahamat-Saleh Haroun



97mins / France / 2017 / French with English subtitles/Certificate TBC
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SYNOPSIS:

Mahamat-Saleh Haroun's soul-searching film focuses on the plight of undocumented asylum seekers desperately trying to find sanctuary in Europe.

Abbas (Eriq Ebouaney), a college professor and father of two, seeks political asylum in France after fleeing the civil war that has raged in the Central African Republic since 2013. A widower since his wife died in attempting to escape the country with him, he has since met Carole (Sandrine Bonnaire), who helps him in his struggles with the French immigration system. Two years of waiting finally elicit a response from the authorities. Everything he holds dear, including his hopes for both his future and those of his children, lie in their decision.

Ebouaney and Bonnaire both give compelling performances, while Haroun masterfully contrasts the intimacy of human relationships with the cold bureaucracy of a vast, impersonal system.

Further information and downloads [here](#)

Photo set can be downloaded [here](#)



CAST

ABBAS
CAROLE
ASMA
YACINE
ÉTIENNE
MARTINE
RÉGINE
THAMMA

Eriq EBOUANEY
Sandrine BONNAIRE
Aalayna LYS
Ibrahim BURAMA DARBOE
Bibi TANGA
Léonie SIMAGA
Régine CONAS
Khampha THAMMAVONGSA

CREW

Director
Script
Director of photography
1er Assistant Director
Production Designer
Costume Designer
Sound
Editor
Original Score
Script Supervisor
Production Manager
Location Manager
Casting Director
Producer
Coproducteur

Mahamat-Saleh HAROUN
Mahamat-Saleh HAROUN
Mathieu GIOMBINI
François CHAILLOU
Éric BARBOZA
Agnès NODEN
Dana FARZANEHPOUR
Jean-François ÉLIE
Wasis DIOP
Olivia BRUYNOGHE
Marianne GERMAIN
Carmen LIMA
Gigi AKOKA
Florence STERN - Pili Films
Arte France Cinéma

97mins / France / 2017

MAHAMAT-SALEH HAROUN

Mahamat-Saleh Haroun, born in 1961, is a film director from Abéché, Chad, who has been living in France since 1982. He began making short films in 1995 and his first feature documentary *BYE BYE AFRICA* (1999) won Best First Film at the Venice International Film Festival. His film *A SCREAMING MAN* received the Jury Prize at the 2010 Cannes Film Festival, which marked Haroun as the first Chadian director to participate at the festival, as well as to compete and win an award in the festival's main competition.



FILMOGRAPHY

1999 *BYE BYE AFRICA* (documentary) – Best First Film, Venice

2002 *OUR FATHER* (Abouna) – Director's Fortnight, Cannes

2006 *DRY SEASON* (Daratt) – Special Jury Prize, Venice

2010 *A SCREAMING MAN* – Jury Prize, Cannes

2013 *GRIGRIS* – Official Competition, Cannes

2016 *HISSEIN HABRE, A CHADIAN TRAGEDY* (documentary) – Special Screening, Cannes

2017 *A SEASON IN FRANCE* (Une Saison en France) – Special Presentations

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

Why did you choose to set this film in Paris?

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. 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 submitted 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.

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 sees 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.

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 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 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.

The song was written in Sango, by Bibi Tanga, a Central African musician, who plays Étienne. 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 realised 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...

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 judgment. 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 and 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. 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. 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. As for Léonie Simaga, who plays Martine, Étienne's girlfriend, she's from Mali and was a long-standing member of La Comédie-Française.

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.



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.

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 article, no artificial narrative construction... I prefer to respect the intelligence of the viewer.