

ANBESSA

Italy / USA

Directed by Mo Scarpelli

TRT - 85 minutes, in Amharic

Official Selection - 2019 BERLINALE FILM FESTIVAL

GENERATIONS KPlus (in Competition)



69th Internationale
Filmfestspiele
Berlin
Generation

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BRIEF SYNOPSIS

Through a coming-of-age story, **ANBESSA** captures one boy taking on modernization on his own terms, revealing a unique and magical perspective on the myth of “progress” that entraps us all. Ten-year-old Asalif and his mother have been displaced from their farmland on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, by the construction of a condominium. As they watch the buildings take shape, they are reminded in small and big ways that their country’s dream of “progress” is not for them. To fight back against those casting him out and those threatening his mother’s safety, Asalif taps into a fantasy of becoming his hero: the lion (“anbessa” in Amharic). Asalif uses his imagination to battle forces beyond his control. His newfound power and fantasy take him to places he never imagined inside and out of the condo until finally, Asalif must find the strength that resides in him as a boy, and shed the lion persona, in order to deal with the tides of change and violence that are usurping a community, a country, and his own identity.

FULL SYNOPSIS

Ethiopia is a country of studied contrasts. The old and the new. The urban and rural. The modern ways and the ancient perspectives. Asalif is a ten-year-old boy who lives on the brittle edge of these culture conflicts. His home is a tool shed perched between an unfinished condominium complex — the biggest in East Africa — and what has been farmland for more than 1,000 years. Asalif and his mother were first displaced by this new condominium a year ago, and live in constant uncertainty of being displaced again. As they watch the building take shape, they are reminded in small and big ways that their country's big dream of “progress” may not be for them.

But Asalif wants a slice of modernity, too. This requires courage, so Asalif channels the persona he and the ancients of his culture and country most revere: the lion.

In Ethiopia, the lion (or “anbessa” in Amharic) is considered more wily than a hyena, wiser than an elephant, stronger than a gorilla, the premier symbol of dauntlessness in the wild. As the lion, Asalif believes he can take on the changing world around him, and he weaves stories about his spiritual understanding of animals and good versus evil into his everyday life.

In observational documentary style, **ANBESSA** follows Asalif through two pivotal years as he struggles to carve out a space to call home. Asalif's father, held in low esteem by locals, is gone, and Asalif feels he must protect his mother, navigate her anxieties, and change her life for the better. When not at school, he digs through the condominium refuse to find and create small things for her, from building a flashlight to scavenging airline magazines that show faraway lands. The condominium's trash becomes Asalif's treasure, but even this pleasure is threatened when new garbage compactors begin to haul it away.

Asalif is independent but seeks to belong and be accepted. He attempts to forge relationships with the rough country boys from the farmland outside the condo to his east, then with the privileged condo kids to his west. But the failure to fit into either space forces him to realize how these worlds seem to have no place for his determined and fantastical personality.



When Asalif builds technology from scraps in the condo, he accesses the world outside his neighborhood. He taps into conflict erupting between the government and farmers displaced by construction projects like the very condo that displaced him; little by little, he finds his country may be sliding into civil war. Through his eyes and ears, we discover the dark side of rapid modernization: thousands of people speaking out against land appropriation begin to disappear or be thrown in jail, hundreds are killed in riots staged against infrastructure projects, and a State of Emergency is ultimately declared by the government which bans reportage or open discourse about the violence. Asalif feels this upheaval — and the government’s heavy-handed response to it — forming a thick cloud of fear, secrecy and silence around the adults in his life.

As a kid, Asalif can access and question what is happening in a way that adults cannot. Through eavesdropping on farmers speaking in hushed tones in a local bar, tuning into snatches of news bulletins on a radio he builds himself, and observing land developers lurking outside his makeshift home, Asalif finds his country’s conflicts crossing his doorstep. Throughout the film, the escalation of violence and tension in Ethiopia parallels Asalif’s personal conflicts, until finally he must face what is happening around him by confronting the violence head-on.

At the start of the film, Asalif channels his own escalating fears for his physical safety into a face-off against hyenas, which he believes reign over the dark forest near his home. Hyenas are symbolic of madness and greed to Ethiopians and in Asalif’s artful tales, the lion always wins over their vicious schemes. Hyenas bawling into the night outside the condominium are an ever-present specter of terror for Asalif and his neighbors. Rarely seen but often heard, they cast a shadow of fear that is not unlike that cast by the government in this anxious political time in Ethiopia.

By Act II, as he tries his fate to stand up against the hyenas, Asalif realizes that perhaps the hyenas are the least of his worries, compared to the very real pain humans inflict on one another: rejections of friendship, suspicious neighbors threatening his mother’s safety, and violence erupting outside the condominium. Then, it is up to him to decide : just how far does the lion fantasy take him, and when must he shed it to take on the world as himself?

ANBESSA follows Asalif conjuring the Lion within himself to face the conflicts of growing up. Asalif must find the strength that resides in him as a boy, and shed the lion persona, in order to deal with the tides of change and violence that are usurping a community, a country — and his own identity. Through a coming-of-age story, **ANBESSA** captures one boy taking on modernization on his own terms, revealing a unique and magical perspective on the myth of “progress” that entraps us all.



TOPIC SUMMARY / BACKGROUND

For the last two years, Ethiopia has been on the edge of civil war. The government's heavy push for new construction projects has ignited tensions with farmers who have had their land appropriated. Protesters have faced off against the military. As a result, at least 1,000 people have been killed and more than 25,000 incarcerated. In late 2016, the government issued a State of Emergency and banned most foreign journalists from entering while harshly suppressing dissent from inside as well. Reports of demonstrators experiencing violence, even execution, have left Ethiopians cloaked in a shroud of silence.

It is within this context that I began exploring an unfinished condominium complex spanning swaths of land on the outskirts of Addis Ababa. I had been filming short films and video projects for non-profit organizations in Ethiopia for the past eight years, but it was in late 2015 that I watched the city transform overnight by huge condominiums and infrastructure projects. I was curious about what these new spaces evoked for Ethiopians, a people who pride themselves on independence from the West and colonial power. Roaming the condo's then-empty structures, I met a young friend who was, in his own ways, confronting "progress" as it steamrolled his world. His imagination and openness enchanted me, while with time and care, the community around him allowed me in. They have since given me access to a unique space: the contested edges of one of Africa's biggest condominium complexes ever, in a time when very few outsiders have been able to film anything in the country.

This film has progressed largely in secret for the past two years, wherein my own outside view has been checked against the perspective and

nuanced understanding of my trusted Ethiopian field producer, as well as Asalif's own discovery of what is unfolding here. Through this intimate access and pivotal timing of the production, I aim to provide a unique snapshot of what it feels like to be growing up in a country where swift changes can lead to violence, human rights violations, and suppression of free speech in a society. Asalif allows us into a world rooted in ancient tradition yet still sprinting toward modernity.

On the surface, Ethiopia is a globalization success story, leading Africa in economic growth, and attracting foreign investors like China and Saudi Arabia for new industrialization and manufacturing. Yet the new developments leave millions like Asalif out of the picture. Much of the government's modernization has unfurled without consultation of the people, not unlike the plans carried out by Emperor Selassie (known himself as a lion — the Lion of Juddah) in the mid-20th century, which spurred student riots, an overthrow of the Emperor, and created a vacuum of power ripe for a despotic regime to step in. It seems the government's ambitions for "progress" outweighed its understanding of reality on the ground. Now, history may be repeating itself. With tensions high and much at stake, these past two years have been the ideal time to examine the effects of large-scale systems on individual human life.

Asalif's experience, observed intimately, allows us to see this as a story about more than just Ethiopia. Like millions of people around the world, Asalif has been left behind by the sparkly promises of "progress." His physical and emotional battle against the new prescriptive way of life reveal anxieties all of us face in this globalized world.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

In 2015, I started roaming around an unfinished condominium complex on the outskirts of Addis Ababa. I was curious for perspective on how a rapid development scheme was playing out on an individual level, especially in a culture so historically resistant to outside influence.

On the edge of miles of these empty uniform buildings outside Addis, I met a boy who was – in his own ways – confronting “progress” as it steam-rolled his world. Pushed from his previous farmland home, he was now squatting in a makeshift house on the outside of one of the biggest condominium complexes in East African history. He was living between two realities (old and new) and actively trying to find his place in a world that seemed to constantly remind him that the new promises of modernity are not meant for him, or people like him.

Asalif's imagination and openness captivated me. While he and his mom had recently been displaced by the condo's construction, he is not a victim. Asalif believes he can take on the condo, and the world, when he channels the strength of his favorite animal (the lion). I discovered how crucial this symbol was for him, and this made me confront how much of the modern world rejects not only people who don't obviously fit into the capitalism tapestry, but also rejects tradition — symbols, fantasy and other age-old ways of confronting our inner selves. Asalif still embodies these things, while also adapting and trying to benefit from the new.

I began filming with Asalif and we started creating a fairytale out of his experience. Fairytales offer us ways to face the complex forces that affect us, ones too large or complicated to comprehend as they unfold.

This is what this ten-year-old protagonist does in his daily life: he spins elaborate stories in order to deal with the intense forces of change and domination that are threatening him and his mother. With time and care, he granted me intimate access to his world and that of his neighbors to really dig into how modernity conflicts human identity and coming of age.

On the surface, Ethiopia seems to benefit greatly from globalization. However, rapid “progress” is actively leaving millions like Asalif out of the picture. While **ANBESSA** is set in Addis Ababa, the ways gentrification, industrialization, and capitalism push so many out of the success story are universal.

Asalif's own struggles for “home” and a sense of self resonate with me. I have never lived in a space where I felt like an insider; I have never really understood or identified with narratives posed for me or about me. This has formed in me a strong sense of independence but also a sense of rudderlessness. I covet dreams, and glean inspiration and self-actualization through fantasy, and I have always respected symbols and the ways they can inform our lives. But Asalif has deepened this respect, informed and challenged my own views of how good intentions and sleek narratives of modernity and “progress” are vastly more complicated than they seem. There is a quiet violence which modernization is impressing on all of us. I made this film because I myself needed a dose of his version of reality, I needed to inhabit the realms he does in order to survive. I see his perspective as not an escape mechanism but rather a unique and essential way of coping with the annals of modernization, with forces beyond our control which threaten our existence.



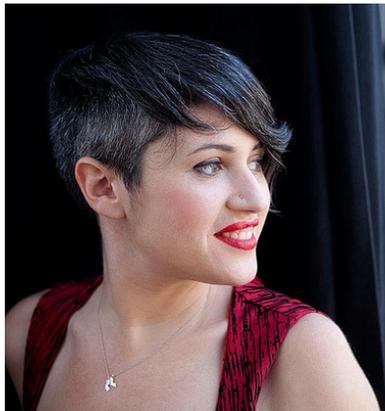
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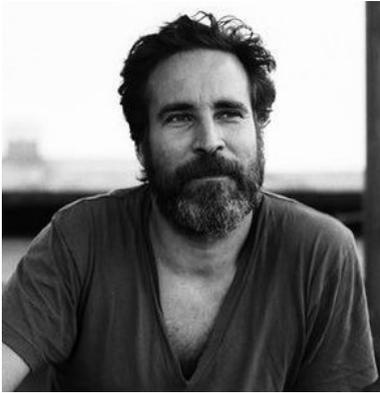
Mo Scarpelli (DIRECTOR, CINEMATOGRAPHER) is a non-fiction filmmaker. Her work seeks to capture the innate poetry of human life while allowing observation to poke holes in prevailing myths or ready-made assumptions of the world.

Mo's first feature-length documentary *FRAME BY FRAME* premiered at SXSW 2015, internationally at Hot Docs (Audience Top Ten Favourite Films), BFI London Film Festival, Camden Intl Film Festival (Jury Award for Best Documentary) and at more than 100 other festivals, garnering over a dozen jury and audience awards, as well as a Cinema Eye Honors nomination. *FRAME BY FRAME* will have its digital and TV release by TIME, Inc.

Mo is a selection for Berlinale Talents. She is twice a recipient of Catapult Film Fund support and has received the Speranza Foundation Female Filmmaker Award. She is also a New America Foundation National Fellow as well as an International Women's Media Foundation Fellow. Her documentary short work includes directing *EL HARA* (Atlanta Intl Film Festival 2017) and *SURVIVING KENSINGTON* (Pittsburgh Intl Film Festival 2013, Vimeo Staff Pick 2017), and serving as cinematographer on several award-winning films, including *SPEAKING IS DIFFICULT* (Sundance 2016).



Caitlin Mae Burke (PRODUCER) is an Emmy award-winning producer of documentary films and nonfiction television. Caitlin Mae Burke produced the features *NUTS!* (dir. Penny Lane), which received a Special Jury Prize at Sundance in 2016, and *OBIT.* (dir. Vanessa Gould), which premiered at Tribeca in 2016 and was named one of *Entertainment Weekly's* "Ten Best Movies of 2017." Burke's other acclaimed productions include *FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY* (directed by Jeff Reichert, Fariyah Zaman, and Michael Koresky) which was one of Film Comment's "Best Undistributed Films of 2018", *WE COULD BE KING* (2015 Sports Emmy for Outstanding Sports Documentary), *SEX AND BROADCASTING* (dir. Tim K. Smith) distributed by Factory 25, and *APPROACHING THE ELEPHANT* (dir. Amanda Rose Wilder), a nominee at the Gotham Awards, Cinema Eye Honors, and Independent Spirit Awards. Her short film work includes *ADVERSARY* (dir. Scott Cummings) for Field of Vision, awarded Best Documentary Short at Dallas International Film Festival, and *ODE TO JOY* (dir. Michael Koshkin). Burke has produced and directed television and web series for CNBC, Destination America, DirecTV, Discovery Networks, ESPN, OWN, TLC, Sundance Channel, and YouTube Red. In 2018, she was selected for the prestigious Berlinale Talents, an annual summit and networking platform, and DOC NYC's inaugural 40 UNDER 40 list.



Nico Leunen (EDITOR) is an internationally renowned editor of narrative and non-fiction cinema. His work includes LOST RIVER (dir. Ryan Gosling, Cannes Film Festival 2014), MEDITERRANEA (dir. Jonas Carpignano, Cannes Film Festival 2015, London Film Festival 2015), THE BROKEN CIRCLE BREAKDOWN (Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film Nominee 2014, Cesar Award for Best Foreign Film 2014, Venice Film Festival Audience Award 2013, Tribeca Film Festival Best Actress and Screenplay 2013), HOME (Venice Film Festival Best Director Award 2016, Toronto Film Festival 2016), BELGICA (Sundance Dramatic World Cinema Directing Award 2016), WHITE SHADOW (Sundance 2014), ABOVE US ALL (Berlinale 2014), ABOVE US ALL (Berlinale 2014), DESERT HAZE (Visions du Réel 2014), THE INVADER (Toronto Film Festival 2011), THE MISFORTUNATE (Cannes Film Festival 2009), KHADAK (Sundance Film Festival 2007, Cultural Innovation Award at Toronto Film Festival 2007, Luigi de Laurentiis Award at Venice Film Festival 2006). Nico is based in Brussels.



Danielle Perissi (EXECUTIVE PRODUCER) is a media executive and film and television producer with over 20 years in the industry. Danielle believes in the power of storytelling to build bridges between people and cultures. Originally from Brooklyn, she has traveled extensively with her work, from roles in London and India, to her most recent stint in the United Arab Emirates. From her marketing roles at Time Warner and Warner Bros. to documentary production, Danielle brings a wide understanding of the industry to her work. In her most recent role, Danielle served as Head of Documentary & Factual Entertainment and Marketing & Communications at Image Nation Abu Dhabi, one of the leading media and entertainment companies in the Arabic-speaking world. With the remit to address issues of local and international significance, the documentary division's slate included: AS ONE; EVERY LAST CHILD; and Oscar-winner Davis Guggenheim's HE NAMED ME MALALA, an intimate portrait of Nobel prize winner Malala Yousafzai.



Gelila Bekele (EXECUTIVE PRODUCER) is a model, humanitarian, social activist and filmmaker. Born in Ethiopia, raised in Italy, and educated in America, Bekele's modeling career began in 2006 working with Ford Models (New York and Paris). She has been featured in major campaigns by Levi's, Diesel, Tory Burch, Anna Sui, Michael Kors, H&M, Pinko, Nespresso, Pantene and L'Oreal. Her first documentary film project, titled "Mai: Life is Not Honey," (a collaboration with director Mo Scarpelli) follows a family of young girls in their everyday life in the Tigray region of northern Ethiopia, where Gelila was born. The short film was released independently in 2015. Bekele is also the author of the book Guzo! (2016), which documents the daily lives of Ethiopians across varying ethnic groups and cultures. Bekele devotes much of her time to charity involvements: focusing mainly on the issue of fundamental resources, particularly access to clean water and education. Gelila offers ANBESSA deep cultural knowledge and a nuanced understanding of the film's themes; she aims to spearhead the film's outreach campaign once ANBESSA is complete.

FILM CREDITS

Director Mo Scarpelli

Executive Producers Danielle Perissi
Gelila Bekele

Producers Caitlin Mae Burke
Mo Scarpelli

Field Producer Misgan Assefa Lulie

Co-Producer D.D. Wigley

Associate Producer Pierce Varous

Director of Photography Mo Scarpelli

Editors Nico Leunen
Thomas Pooters

Music by Erik K. Skodvin

Sound Design Tijn Hazen

Re-Recording Mixer Tijn Hazen
Gustavo A. Gonzalez

Translators Misgan Assefa Lulie
Jessica Beshir
Menbi Seyoum
Ambay Tessema
Adey Hailu
Harya Tarekegn

Featuring Asalif Tewold
Alem Sebisibe Ayitenfsu
Kuckuyay
Kuba
Abinet
Biruk Aderi
Getnet
Ato Silesh
Meseret Dechasa
Birtukan (Mule) Biruk Aderi
Aster Biruk Aderi
Fikadu Biruk Aderi
Tigist Biruk Aderi
Tsehay Biruk Aderi
Teshome Seifu
Eshetu Zewdie
Soloman Girma
Fikrab Gebeyehu Silesh
Misgan Assefa Lulie

FILM SUPPORT FROM



AND FISCAL SPONSORSHIP BY



A person wearing a blue hoodie is seen from the back, looking out over a cityscape at sunset. The city lights are blurred in the background, and the sky is a mix of orange and yellow. The person's hoodie has a small tear on the back.

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