

**SCREEN**DAILY

## 'The Village Next To Paradise': Cannes Review

BY **NIKKI BAUGHAN** | 21 MAY 2024

A family attempts to follow their dreams on the coast of Somalia in this Un Certain Regard debut



**SOURCE: CANNES FILM FESTIVAL  
'THE VILLAGE NEXT TO PARADISE'**

*Dir/scr: Mo Harawe. Austria/Germany/France/Somalia. 2024. 132mins*

Events move at ponderous pace in *The Village Next To Paradise*, a film that is resolutely about a journey rather than a destination. Following a brother and sister living in the windswept village of Paradise, on the coast of Somalia, writer/director Mo Harawe's feature debut is a determined attempt to find the

normal, the mundane even, in a place that is usually portrayed in the media as anything but.

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### ***Has a striking visual literacy***

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Harawe, who was born in Mogadishu before emigrating to Australia at the age of 18 and subsequently studying film in Germany, has previously made short films including two set in Somalia; *Life On The Horn* (2020), which bowed in Locarno, and *Will My Parents Come To See Me* (2022), which debuted in Berlin. His first feature is also the first Somali film to screen in Cannes; something that should help it find an audience amongst fans of authentic world cinema at further festivals following its *Un Certain Regard* premiere.

Harawe starts his film with a real-life English-language news bulletin about a US drone attack in Somalia, complete with on-screen explanatory graphics which makes the event look like a kind of video game. Editor Joan Scrinzi then cuts straight to a dusty Somalian roadside, where men (and excavators) are digging graves in the dirt; this juxtaposition between the at-one-remove observations of Western outsiders and the lived experience of Somalians is the narrative impetus of the film.

One of these hardworking men is Mamargade (Ahmed Ali Farah), whose regular job of burying the dead – often those killed in drone attacks – is becoming less lucrative as larger building firms, with their efficient heavy machinery, are taking all the business. Marmagade lives in a modest but comfortable one-room home with his young son Cigaal (a charming Ahmed Muhammad Salesian) and recently divorced sister Araweelo (Ana Ahmed Ibrahim), a skilled seamstress who dreams of opening her own tailoring business.

Life is hard for this family. Marmagade must scrape a living with menial work, Araweelo is hampered by local laws surrounding single women, Cigaal's future is placed in jeopardy when the village school closes. But they are not simply victims of circumstance. Mamargade decides to pull out the financial stops to send Cigaal to a city school while an undeterred, and unendingly patient, Araweelo finds her own ingenious ways to fulfil her ambitions.

A dynamic hospital sequence, in which the camera stays trained on Cigaal, hands over his eyes, as the aftermath of a drone attack swirls around him, is the most overt nod to the ever-present threat of violence in volatile Somalia (which, ironically, keeps Marmagade in business). Other moments are more everyday; Cigaal shows his father the drone defence manoeuvre he learned in school, there is a local protest against illegal foreign fishing boats and a brief reference to a catastrophic chemical spill some years before (also the focus of *Life On The Horn*).

The film, which shot over three months in Somalia, has a striking visual literacy; a particular achievement given that most of the crew are newcomers. Egyptian DoP Mostafa El Kashef has a real eye for framing, often placing his characters at the edge of a wide shot which takes in the comforts of their home, or the rugged beauty of the landscape that surround them.

While the inexperience of the largely non-professional cast is obvious at times, it adds to the natural, unhurried feel of Harawe's film. There's a strong sense of authorship in every scene, every decision, from Marmalade's matter-of-fact yet sensitive approach to burying the dead to Araweelo's quiet determination to best a system that she knows she cannot change. This may not be paradise in a traditional sense, but it is nevertheless a place of hope.

Production companies: FreibeuterFilm

Producers: Sabine Moser & Oliver Neumann

International sales: Totem Films, [laure@totem-films.com](mailto:laure@totem-films.com)

Cinematography: Mostafa El Kashef

Production design: Nuur Abdulkadir

Editing: Joana Scrinzi

Main cast: Ahmed Ali Farah, Anab Ahmed Ibrahim, Ahmed Mohamud Saleban