

# Somali Filmmaker Mo Harawe Makes History in Cannes With Intimate Family Drama *The Village Next to Paradise*

by Christopher Vourlias

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After making waves on the festival circuit with a pair of heralded short films, Somali filmmaker Mo Harawe makes his auspicious feature debut at this year's [Cannes Film Festival](#) with "The Village Next to Paradise," which premieres May 21 in the French fest's Un Certain Regard section — the first feature from the African nation ever to screen on the Croisette.

An intimate family drama set in a windswept Somali fishing village, "Paradise" follows Mamargade (Ahmed Ali Farah), a single father working odd jobs to provide a better life for his son, Cigaal (Ahmed Mohamud Saleban). They're joined by his sister, Araweelo (Anab Ahmed Ibrahim), who comes back to live with the duo after her divorce. Each pursues their own ambitions in a country wracked by civil war, natural disasters and the deadly threat posed by the U.S. drones constantly buzzing overhead.

A testament to love, family and resilience, "The Village Next to Paradise" is produced by Sabine Moser and Oliver Neumann for Austria's Freibeuter Film ("Great Freedom"), Germany's Niko Film ("More Than Ever"), France's Kazak Prods. ("Corsage," "Titane") and Somalia's Maanmaal. Totem Films is handling international sales.

Born and raised in Mogadishu, Harawe emigrated to Austria in 2009, where he taught himself the fundamentals of filmmaking before pursuing formal studies in Germany. Beginning with the short films "Life on the Horn" (2020), an official selection of the Locarno Film Festival, and "Will My Parents Come to See Me" (2022), which premiered in Berlin, he began to explore life in the country he left behind, using cinema to bridge the gap between the memories of his homeland

and the way Somalia was perceived through a European lens.

"It was a way to know myself, in way," Harawe tells *Variety*. As an immigrant, he often found himself recalling his Somali childhood to skeptical audiences. "I didn't think I was living in a failed state," he said. "You question yourself. And then when you start writing, you realize, 'No, my reality is reality.' Willingly or not willingly, that's what came out."

"The Village Next to Paradise" doesn't shy away from the complexities of Somalia, an impoverished country thrust against the Indian Ocean whose

precarious central government has struggled for decades to keep a violent insurgency at bay. The birthplace of the Al-Shabaab terrorist group, it has also been a focal point of the U.S. war on terror, the consequences of which are felt throughout Harawe's film.

The director resists the urge to cast Somalis as helpless victims, though his poised debut certainly exposes the human toll behind euphemisms like "collateral damage." Harawe is more interested in probing at the intimate bonds of his unconventional but tight-knit family unit, while exploring how individuals assume or evade responsibility for their actions.

He is careful, however, to withhold judgment when his characters make compromises in the face of forces beyond their control. "I'm not blaming anyone," he said. "If you survive in these kinds of circumstances, you are superhuman. And if you don't make it, then you're still human. It's not that you're any less [of a person]."

While the film's title hints at the thwarted promise of a troubled country where paradise remains tantalizingly out of reach, Harawe insisted Somalis — bound by family ties and an unwavering perseverance — are ultimately masters of their own fate.

"There is still hope. You can take a lot of things, but that's not something you can take from them," he said. "There is a freedom in that. It's hard to describe. There is a freedom when you have this hope and you have this resilience. No matter what happens, there is tomorrow."



