

Eritrea's Silver Screen Success

Written by shabait Administrator
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In the flickering light of Asmara's Impero Cinema, Eritreans sit gripped by a tale of brave soldiers risking all in love and war. Eritrea's young film industry is booming. Only 14 years after the Horn of Africa country acquired its independence from Ethiopia, some 60 new films are released every year in the nation's main Tigrinya language. "There is a new film shown in the cinema almost every week," said Franco Sardella, an accomplished cinematographic director who shot Eritrea's first feature film in 1997. "More and more people are enjoying these films."

Over 140,000 tickets were sold for Franco's film - the epic *Barud '77* - which, like many Eritrean movies, tells a brutally realistic tale of defiant rebels resisting foreign domination, a favorite theme in a country still attached to its warring past. The popularity of the country's own films has only grown since then. Eritrea discovered film while an Italian colony, and Asmara's imposing modernist theaters still sport the posters of 1950s Italian and American cinema. But it was during the 30-year liberation war against arch-foe Ethiopia that Eritrean cinema found its own voice. Rebels encouraged artistic education and engaged in meticulous documentation - on video - of every aspect of life at the front.

"Actors would perform plays for the people and combatants," said ex-fighter Esaias Tsegay, a respected director and poet who became a leading member of the fighters' cultural office after he was wounded. "It was meant to agitate people to fight for the liberation of Eritrea. "Later, those dramas were then filmed - first on stage, then on actual battlefield locations - to increase access for a scattered audience fighting a bitter guerrilla war.

"The early films were really stage plays documented by cameras," Esaias said. "But given time, that changed and people began to know what cinema is." With liberation in 1991, Eritrean cinema grew alongside efforts to re-develop the war-shattered nation. "We wanted to contribute to the reconstruction of the country," said Franco, who helped establish Eritrea's main independent film production company after independence. "Reconstruction is not only about rebuilding, it is also about culture, arts and films," he added.

However, it was the return to war with Ethiopia in the bloody 1998-2000 border conflict that shifted the focus from stage drama to film. "We were all involved in the fighting, so it was not possible to do much theater," said Efriem Kahsay, a director of 10 films. "Actors visiting Asmara would be grabbed by a director before they returned to the trenches." With major projects costing up to 300,000 nakfa (\$30,000), Eritrean film budgets are dwarfed by Hollywood or even their African cousins in "Nollywood," Nigeria's prolific film industry. Yet the sums involved are serious cash for this small nation of 4.9 million people.

And despite fierce competition from foreign films - cheap to screen and with expensive special effects impossible in Eritrea - ticket sales cover most costs, with sales of up to 1,000 DVDs to the Eritrean diaspora boosting profits for successful films. "Unlike many films in Africa, our films are done without any international backing," Franco said proudly, echoing the national passion for self-reliance. Standards remain low - with only around five films a year of professional quality - but filmmakers are working hard to raise standards.

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"As far as cinematography and motion pictures are concerned we are still at the start," Esaias admitted. "But we are learning and becoming more experienced all the time in techniques, acting, and characterization." "With an ongoing tense border stalemate with Ethiopia, war remains a major inspiration for filmmakers. "My whole life went to the war - I was there for 14 [to] 15 years - so I can't think of a theme which is prior to this reality," Esaias said.

Many scripts are stifled by strict government censors, but directors expect broader themes to develop as the industry matures, and remain hopeful for its development. "They are also making love stories now ... and that is natural - if there is peace, you don't expect to have so many war films," Esaias added. "I see a bright future for Eritrean cinema."