

INTERVIEW WITH AÄLÄM-WÄRQUE DAVIDIAN



Aäläm Wärque Davidian © Yuval Moyal

**WINNER OF THE 2018 AUDENTIA AWARD FOR
HER DEBUT FEATURE “FIG TREE”**

BY KARIN SCHIEFER

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FIG TREE TAKES PLACE IN ETHIOPIA IN 1989. AS AN INTRODUCTION, CAN YOU GIVE US A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE POLITICAL SITUATION BACK THEN?

We refer to the time when the military regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam was in power as the Derg period. I was born into this civil war and one thing I remember is that people in Ethiopia spoke about war all the time. War was a permanent background. From my point of view as a child back then, I didn't know what war was about, but men went off to war and many children like me didn't know their fathers, since the fathers were at war – as if they were at work. Every young man had to go to war, full stop. Nobody questioned that. Women had to manage life on their own, but still men held on to power and were entitled to do whatever they wanted. In order to write the script I tried to recreate that state of mind from my childhood, when I experienced a world in which women tried to keep life going in this crazy situation. I woke up in the morning, had breakfast and went to school. The women in my family built a normal life around me despite the circumstances. And it was far from obvious. It was only later, when I started to read about this period, that I realised what an amazing job my grandmother, my mother and all the women around me had done to

preserve a “normal” life for me. I discovered their love for life. Men were in control – they fought and destroyed life – while the women did everything they could to stay on the side of life. I discovered the power and the beauty of this attitude. These women wanted a peaceful life and expressed their love inside themselves and in love for each other.

WHAT DID IT MEAN TO YOU TO DELVE INTO YOUR CHILDHOOD MEMORIES? HAD YOU MAINTAINED CONTACT WITH ETHIOPIA WHILE LIVING IN ISRAEL?

I had stayed in touch with Ethiopia, since my family was there. But when I started to write, it felt like going on a journey that forced me to take a look at my life at that time. When I speak about my life here in Israel, I mention that I was born in Ethiopia and came to Israel at the age of 11. But that sounds as if my life only started from that point; it skips my childhood years. The writing process took me back to my roots. I found myself going on trips to Ethiopia not only to listen to the language, to sense the atmosphere and the emotions linked to this place, but also to talk to the people about their memories of that period.

THE CHARACTERS IN FIG TREE SPEAK AMHARIC. IS IT A LANGUAGE YOU STAYED FAMILIAR WITH DESPITE THE FACT THAT YOU HAD MOVED TO ISRAEL AT AN EARLY AGE?



Fig Tree © Genene Abara

I actually wrote the script in Hebrew and had it translated. When I started to work with the actors, I was very open to their contributions and did not stick to all the dialogue as I had written it. I wanted them to feel totally at ease in their language. You have to understand that Ethiopian Jews have a very particular Amharic accent. My actors, however, came from Addis and I wanted the language in the film to be authentic and true to the Jewish dialect. It was very interesting to work on the accents.

IN A MORE GENERAL SENSE, HOW DID YOU EXPERIENCE WORKING WITH ACTORS IN THIS, YOUR FIRST FEATURE-LENGTH MOVIE?

There's no casting agency in Ethiopia. I had a small team of ten students from the Blue Nile Film and Television Academy who attended a workshop with Esther Kling, an Israeli casting advisor, and she taught them the basic elements of the casting process. Then they spread out to search for the actors. In a first round I had to select the candidates I wanted to audition, and that was a very instructive process, a kind of directing

exercise for me. I had to find a way of talking to the actors and experience for myself how to direct them. At first it seemed to me that the auditions were taking up too much time for what was really a preliminary phase. But in a way I was already using the casting process for my directing. The actress who plays Mina's grandmother is a famous Ethiopian actress who, of course, didn't want to audition. I knew she was a star, but I wanted to find out in this early phase how I could deal with her, and I insisted. Eventually she came and did an excellent job.

THE FIG TREE IS A METAPHOR WHICH (AS SOMEBODY PUTS IT IN THE FILM) REPRESENTS HEAVEN AND HELL AT THE SAME TIME. IN YOUR STORY ABOUT WAR WE DON'T HEAR ANY SHOOTING OR EXPLOSIONS. YOU CREATE AN ATMOSPHERE OF "NORMALITY", THOUGH IT IS INTERRUPTED

NOW AND THEN BY THE ATROCIOUS KIDNAPPING OF YOUNG MEN WHO ARE FORCED INTO THE ARMY. DID YOU INTEND TO BUILD YOUR STORY WITHIN THIS TENSION BETWEEN NORMALITY AND CRUELTY?

I regarded the creation of this film as a very long journey back into my memories. In the first place, the fig tree is a biblical symbol. You may use the fig leaf to cover yourself or your memories, or you can remove it and understand that you are naked. It felt to me as if I had wrapped my memories in a fig leaf from the moment I immigrated to Israel.



Fig Tree © Genene Abara

This film was a way of taking a look at myself. Secondly, the fig tree is definitely a symbol that represents both normality and war. The core image is the soldier who has lost both his legs and tries to hang himself on the enormous roots at the foot of the tree, while the kids – Mina and her boyfriend, who are in love – are playing higher up in the branches of the tree. Up in the branches of the tree there's light and playfulness, while down at the bottom of the tree it's dark and rotten. I wanted to combine the achievement of the women who did everything to offer their children a normal life and the perception of a child. I remember seeing boys kidnapped with my own eyes, right in front of me when I was coming out of school. It was a horribly stressful moment – and then I went home, and I didn't even speak about it. I went to play, pretending nothing had happened. Everybody knew that people came to take away the young boys, but nobody talked about it.



Fig Tree © Genene Abara

WHAT WAS THE EFFECT ON THE WAY THE SOCIETY FUNCTIONED, GIVEN THAT MEN WENT TO WAR, DIED OR CAME BACK SEVERELY INJURED? DIDN'T WOMEN HAVE TO TAKE OVER EVERYTHING? WHAT WERE YOUR ROLE MODELS WHEN YOU WERE A GIRL?

I think it created a very interesting situation. On the one hand, men still kept power, but on the other hand you could also find a lot of women in important political positions. I remember when I was a girl, my uncle came back home from the war, severely injured, and took charge of our home again. He told me what to do and what time I had to be back home in the evening.

The issue that bothers me a lot is about what happens to our power as women. I'm the mother of a little boy, and I realise that I have the power to educate him. The question is: When do we women step back and lose or give up our position? During every war in the world women take care of everything, and when the men return from war, we step back and hand them back their power and accept our role in the background. It's crazy.

IS FIG TREE ALSO A FILM ABOUT THE END OF CHILDHOOD?

In a way, yes. Think of the scene when Mina and her boyfriend find the soldier who tried to hang himself. They both fight for his life; they carry him home, give him food and take care of him. Although he has no legs any more, he leaves the house as fast as he can

by using his arms. Mina has to realise that she cannot do anything for him. She understands something important about life: she can neither help nor rescue him. There's only a miserable and lonely life ahead of him. And in the very end she herself loses her love and her hopes for the future. Everything is torn apart by the violent force called war. People cannot decide about their own lives. That's what I wanted to show by narrating Mina's story of both the horrifying

acts of war and a sort of normal everyday life. Life may appear "normal". The war seems to happen out there but in the end it impacts on your life and takes your soul. This is war. Even if you don't hear the shooting, one day the consequences of the war will hit you.

YOU ARE THE WINNER OF THE 2018 AUDENTIA AWARD. WHAT DOES THIS PRIZE MEAN TO YOU?

I consider the prize an acknowledgement of hard work. When I started shooting the film my boy was two years old, and I knew for the next six months I'd basically be away from him, even if I flew back and forth on a regular basis to visit. It was a powerful decision, but it's hard, and it undermines the soul. The whole process of

making this movie took six years. Six years with the uncertainty of whether I'd be able to make and finish the film, since there are no cinema funds in Ethiopia. It was a very exhausting process. This prize is the acknowledgement of very hard work. It was the first time I had directed a feature-length film. It meant going back to the country of my childhood, which was not my home country any more. I had to face a lot of challenges and pressure. And then somebody came to me and said: "We know that and we understand you." I was very, very glad to receive this prize. It's an enormous support. I'm already working on my next feature film and this award has given me huge encouragement.