



**NEW RELEASES**

# Limbo

In a boxy 4:3 frame, like an old television show, a narrow road spills down toward the sea and the hills of a Scottish island rise up toward the sky. It's a scene most familiar from aesthetically pleasing tourist photographs and advertisements urging you to 'visit Scotland'. But beyond the frame, life is not so picturesque for the refugees caught in limbo between the homes they have been forced to leave behind and the lives that they hope to build in the UK.

Trapped in this temporal and spatial purgatory is Omar (Amir El-Masry), who has journeyed to Scotland from Syria with his instrument – his grandfather's oud, always carried at his side as a material reminder of his connection to home – and the inescapable baggage of trauma, exile and homesickness. An acclaimed musician back in Damascus, he fears that he will not be able to play again. Here, in this nowhere land, it just doesn't feel right.

Accompanying Omar on his quest for asylum are Farhad (Vikash Bhai), an optimistic soul from Afghanistan, Ghanaian Abedi (Kwabena Ansah) and Nigerian Wasef (Ola Orebiyi), who all share a dilapidated house. Together, they hang out at the jetty, the park, a farm, the fishery.

Yet the vast, bleak splendour of the landscape does nothing to counter their discomfort in sub-zero temperatures with no coats, no proper income, and no regular contact with loved ones. Omar uses his mobile phone to play back old footage of his oud concerts, but it's virtually useless as a means of communication ('There was a better signal than this in the Mediterranean,' reckons one of the men). Instead he relies on the island's only phone box. The see-through glass shelter becomes a portal to his parents and his past, a gateway to memories of food and music. It almost – but not quite – shuts out the unceasing wind.

As Omar and the other men navigate the island, they also learn to navigate the contradictions of Scottish culture. Through the refugees' interactions with the island's locals, *Limbo* captures something of the variance between political rhetoric that Scotland is a welcoming place, open to all, and the realities of a country that, like everywhere else, has problems with racism. Teenagers and adults alike casually throw racist stereotypes at Omar (is he Al-Qaeda, does he make bombs and rape women?) before offering him a ride into town (they don't want him to get cold). The absurdity would be funny if his attempts to negotiate the strange environment weren't so fraught with sadness and deprivation; this is a place where animal lives are worth more to white people than those of fellow humans.

Nevertheless, despite the austere conditions, the characters find humour and companionship. Their only furniture is a small, old-fashioned television from the donation centre, which provides a range of props and gadgets that become a recurring joke throughout the film. Discussions about racism between men of colour are delivered with wry humour. And Farhad offers a

continuous stream of comic relief: from his obsession with Freddie Mercury to his love for a stolen chicken (Freddie Jr, whose incongruous clucking around the house is a source of great delight), he is an ever-cheerful foil to Omar's more sombre presence.

Of course, even Farhad has his reasons for taking his chances in the hostile environment of the UK's immigration system. His brief but exquisitely delivered testimony is as poignant and touching as more visceral and lengthy scenes involving Omar, and had me reaching for the tissues.

El-Masry's performance as Omar is absorbing throughout; Bhai's as Farhad achieves nuance and pathos with remarkably little dialogue. The pair carry the film with aplomb. Ola Orebiyi and Kwabena Ansah deserve praise too, capturing both the tired anger and playful resistance that are coping mechanisms for the stranded men. Abedi's role-play in a 'cultural awareness' session is a masterclass in subtly undermining the white instructors.

Visually clever, and by turns witty and moving (director Ben Sharrock never sacrifices feelings for aesthetics), *Limbo* ends as it begins – with uncertainty. There are no answers to the men's questions, no certainties in their quests for survival.

But the film is a reminder, at a moment when empathy often feels in short supply, that the real boats crossing to the UK are carrying real people. People with families, hobbies, traditions, and songs. It's a reminder, without ever being piteous, that when we watch television news or footage framed by social media feeds that we're only seeing a partial story.

As Omar takes to the village-hall stage to share his music in the film's closing scene, the aspect ratio changes, expanding to widescreen. Look beyond your limited worldview, *Limbo* says, and see the bigger, more beautiful, and more complicated picture.

### **Rebecca Harrison, Sight & Sound, Summer 2021**

For Scottish writer-director Ben Sharrock, the idea of telling a story that reflects the complexity of individual refugee life had been a long-held passion. Sharrock picked up the prestigious Michael Powell Award for Best British Feature Film 2016 for his feature debut *Pikadero* – the tale of a young couple searching for love in troubled economic times, shot entirely in the Basque language – and his sophomore feature takes a similarly humane look at ordinary lives caught in international turmoil.

'I studied Arabic and Politics at Edinburgh University as an undergrad and spent a year living in Syria – this was 2009, just before everything kicked off' says Ben. 'Then, when I was in film school in 2013 I shot a short film at the refugee camps in southern Algeria. I spent time living in the camps, working with an NGO, and became fascinated with the impact of being a refugee has on one's own identity. We would go into the camp schools and ask the displaced children to draw how they saw themselves – what they came up with was nothing to do with the fact that they were refugees.'

‘It was difficult to approach such a complex and multi-faceted subject matter because you always feel in danger of not being able to do justice to the subject. In truth, it’s impossible to say everything that needs to be said and explore everything to do with the “Refugee Crisis”. And as such, for me, it wasn’t about making a film about the “Refugee Crisis” as it was about making a film about a young man’s identity and him grieving for the loss of identity. This is something that is universally relatable because throughout life, we can all lose parts of us that form our sense of identity, no matter what your background is.’

When it came to writing the script for *Limbo*, Ben was clear. ‘I wanted to tell a story that has the landscape of the refugee as a subject matter, but with my style of filmmaking. So there are absurdist elements which rally against the representation of refugees in mainstream media, films that focus on the purely sensationalist aspects of that subject matter. I was thinking about the friends that I have in Syria, about how much I have in common with them. When I lived there, I ended up playing in the Damascus rugby team. We toured to the Lebanon and after matches we’d go out for a drink and chat. But here, we often have the left-wing media pushing us towards pitying refugees and the right-wing media scaremongering and demonising refugees. I wanted to tell a story where becoming a refugee wasn’t a conscious choice that a person has made – that it was only one facet of that person’s life. Yet at the same time, show how the label of “refugee” can be deeply destructive to one’s sense of identity.’

The decision for *Limbo* to focus exclusively on the male refugee experience was a very deliberate one for Ben. ‘It’s the single male refugee that’s being demonised the most, seen as the big threat to society in the right-wing media. At university my dissertation was on Muslim representation in US cinema and TV. That idea of the threat of the single male refugee, someone who is seen as personifying “the other”, is very prevalent in our society and unfortunately there seems to be a resurgence of racial hatred, a re-emergence with people like Trump and the more sensationalised elements of Brexit.’

## **Production notes**

LIMBO

Directed by: Ben Sharrock  
©: Limbo Production Ltd, Channel Four Television Corporation, The British Film Institute  
Production Companies: Caravan Cinema, Creative Scotland  
With the support of: the British Film Institute, Film4  
Developed with the support of: Scottish Film Talent Network through Creative Scotland via BFI NET.WORK  
Made with the support of the: BFI’s Film Fund  
International Sales: Protagonist Pictures  
Executive Producers: Julia Oh, Daniel Battsek, Robbi Allen, Ross McKenzie, Lizzie Francke  
Produced by: Irune Gurtubai, Angus Lamont  
Line Producer: Wendy Griffin  
For BFI: Development Executive: David Segal Hamilton; Production & Development Executives: Camilla Wren, Farhana Bhula; Production Manager: Iris Cohen; Production Finance: Katie Ellen; Director of Legal and Business Affairs: Clare Coulter  
For Film4: Deputy Director: Sue Bruce-Smith; Head of Creative: Ollie Madden; Development & Production Executive: Ben Coren; Head of Production: Tori Parry; Production Executive: Emily Leach; Senior Legal & Business Affairs Executive: Donnchadh McNicholl  
For Creative Scotland: Executive Director: Isabel Davis; Executive Producer: Sean Greenhorn  
Production Coordinators: Iain Canning, Shona Mackenzie  
Production Accountants: Paul Zieleniec, Neil Cairns  
Location Manager: Richard Brough  
Location and Recce Support: Screen Scotland Screen Commission  
Locations Assistant/Fixer: Adam Keltie  
Post-production Supervisor: Clare Maclean  
1st Assistant Director: Wendy Ashman  
2nd Assistant Director: Sean Boyle  
Crowd 2nd Assistant Director: Marilyn Edmond  
3rd Assistant Director: Fraser Malcolm  
Script Supervisor: Georgina Higgins  
Casting Director: Dan Jackson  
Associate Casting Director: Ross Barratt  
Script Editor: Anna Seifert Speck  
Written by: Ben Sharrock  
Director of Photography: Nick Cooke  
Steadicam: Martin Parry  
2nd Assistant Camera: David van der Zanden  
Focus Puller: Dave Hutchison  
Gaffer: Steve Arthur  
Best Boy: Sean McDonald  
Key Grip: Mark Dorris  
Stills Photographers: Saskia Coulson, Colin Tennant  
Visual Effects Supervisor: Nicholas Bennett  
Visual Effects Executive Producer: Kate Warburton  
Visual Effects Producer: Karl Kuehn  
Visual Effects Co-ordinator: Danielle Dunster  
Editors: Karel Dolak, Lucia Zucchetti  
1st Assistant Editors: Eve Doherty, Victoria Bate, Alastair Mackintosh  
Production Designer: Andy Drummond  
Standby Art Director: Caroline Grebbell  
Assistant Art Director: Elias Sommer  
Graphic Designer: Kenny McGuire  
Scenic Artist: Caroline Doney  
Production Buyer: Christine Orr  
Property Master: Tony Sheridan  
Costume Designer: Holly Rebecca  
Assistant Costume Designer/Costume Standby: Kirsty Halliday  
Costume Supervisor: Stuart Truesdale  
Make-up Designer: Kat Morgan  
Make-up Artist: Madeleine Drewell  
Main Titles and Credits by: Crystalness  
End Titles Created with: Endcrawl

Original Score by: Hutch Demouilpied  
Double Bass: John Edwards  
Saw and Violin: Quinta  
Cello: Hannah Marshall  
Violin and Viola: Ali Alana  
Flute and Recorders: Juliet Grace  
Brass Ensemble: Harvey’s Brass  
Soprano Saxophone: Christopher White  
Tenor Saxophone and Clarinet: Sue Lynch  
Alto and Soprano Saxophones: Adrian Northover  
Piano: Vladimir Miller  
Oud: Frank Moon  
Music Supervisor: Phil Canning  
Oud Consultant/Experts: Attab Haddad, Khyam Allami  
Sound Designer: Ben Baird  
Sound Recordist: Phil Croal  
Boom Operator: Fabio Santucci  
Re-recording Mixer: Ben Baird  
Sound Editor: Jack Wensley  
Dialogue Editor: Alexei Mungersdorff  
[Sound] Effects Editor: Jamie McPhee  
ADR Mixer: Nick Kray  
Supervising Foley Artist: Digba Kurpel  
Foley Artist: Biko Gogaladze  
Foley Recordist: George Lekishvili  
Foley Editor: Srdjan Kurpel  
Stunt Supervisor/Fight Arranger: Curtis Rivers  
Syrian Arabic Consultant: Marwa Mouazen  
Dialect Coaches: Neil Swain, Marina Tyndall, Ros Steen, Marwa Mouazen  
Animal Handler: Joyce Miller  
Special Thanks: David Schwimmer, Polly Stokes

Cast

Amir El-Masry (Omar)  
Vikash Bhai (Farhad)  
Ola Orebiyi (Wasef)  
Kwabena Ansah (Abedi)  
Kenneth Collard (Boris)  
Kais Nashif (Nabil)  
Sidse Babett Knudsen (Helga)  
Sodienye Ojewuyi (Hamad)  
Adam Abdalrhman (crying man in phonebox)  
Darina Al Joundi (voice of Omar’s mum)  
Nayef Rashed (voice of Omar’s dad)  
Cameron Fulton (Plug)  
Lewis Gribben (Stevie)  
Silvie Furneaux (Cheryl)  
Iona Elizabeth Thomson (Tia)  
Barbara Hunter (scooter woman)  
Shereen Sadiq (Omar’s mum in video)  
Hayan Rich (Omar’s dad in video)  
Rob Keltie (postman)  
Raadi Mahdi (Abdul)  
Elizabeth Ellis, Caroline Carlin, Gavin Carlin (radio participants)  
Grace Chilton (Margaret)  
Raymond Mearns (Mike)  
Ellie Haddington (Beatrice)  
Max Hendrick, Robin Spratt, Karen Campbell, Maureen Du Pree (police)  
Sanjeev Kohli (Vikram)  
Eric (Freddie Jr)  
Bobby Paton (voice of policeman)  
Tess Allen (voice recording)  
Gilly Gilchrist (Jim)  
Bess (dog)

UK 2020©  
104 mins

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