



THE TIME IS NEW

# Talking about Trees

Current moving-image culture is frequently characterised in terms of abundance: an excess of films being made, a cacophony of other competing forms, an embarrassment of ways of watching. But, of course, a profusion of product and platforms doesn't equate to quality, balanced representation or freedom of expression. This meditative documentary reminds us that whatever spats play out between cinephiles regarding superheroes, screen volumes or streaming services, there are those film cultures in which the challenges set by progress have been more existential. The demise of cinema in Sudan, director Ibrahim Shaddad observes, 'was not natural at all. It was murdered by a traitor.'

Shaddad is one of four Sudanese filmmakers, all now in old age, who here look back on their experiences of repression and censorship as they put on free public screenings to try to revive a cinema culture stifled since the 1990s by Islamist state forces. Their project is enthusiastically welcomed by a population largely raised without big-screen exhibition – the pure glee with which one man declares, 'Seeing a movie with friends is better than watching one alone at home!' will warm any cinephile's heart – but meets stumbling blocks in terms of technical presentation and official interference.

It's slow progress, and as the friends very slowly puzzle over what sort of projector they need, it's hard not to wish they'd find themselves a hotshot intern to help with the tech side. But their confoundment in the face of a transformed communications culture is resonant: not only have the films they might have made been prevented, and the films they did make suppressed, but the very form they learned is obsolete. Checking out a disused movie theatre, they find themselves trampling masses of tangled film stock. 'Here is the history of Sudanese cinema!' one declares.

Their decades-old friendship and shared sense of humour are evoked as warmly as their commitment to cinema. In a lark that turns peculiarly moving, the group entertain themselves during a blackout by filming Shaddad re-enacting Gloria Swanson's climactic speech from *Sunset Blvd.* (1950): 'There's nothing else, just us and the cameras and all you wonderful people out there in the dark...' Even bringing together a group of people, the filmmakers discover, is an undertaking met with suspicion: the very communality that they and Norma Desmond regard as the heart of the cinematic experience is a red flag to the authorities.

**Hannah McGill, *Sight & Sound*, February 2020**

## Director's statement

I can say without hesitation that this film was born from an epic yet real image that happened in front of my eyes, I remember it clearly. It was the first time that I participated in a screening at a village with the four friends.

After they set up the canvas screen and the show started, sandy wind began to blow moving the screen left and right. Two of them (Manar and Ibrahim) quickly got up and sat on each side of the screen to anchor it down by tying both corners to their chairs; no one left despite the wind, and the audience continued watching the film engagingly. As the wind strengthened, the screen blew up and deflated like the sails of a boat, and sometimes the picture was getting out of the screen and coming back.

I was watching the faces of both men as they held the screen while laughing nervously like sailors in a storm. I felt that this trip to a nearby village to Khartoum granted me one of my most important existential lessons about resistance and determination. It was then when the necessity to make this film was born.

This image, that granted me the motivation to create this film, is not included in the film – just like the many other images that these four filmmakers wanted to accomplish in the past 40 years, but the aggressive political winds of the country stood against their dreams, leaving behind a great bitterness but also a strong desire to create.

*Talking about Trees* is the tale of their 45 years of attempting to make and to show films and of the tireless hope that unites them forever, the story of a struggle of four crafty men with a witty sense of humour.

## **About the director**

Suhaib Gasmelbari was born in 1979 in Sudan. He studied Cinema in France at the University of Paris VIII. He has written and directed several short films, both fiction and documentary. *Talking about Trees* is his first feature film. He is also a researcher with a special focus on audio-visual archives. Through his research he was able to find some long-lost Sudanese films, and actively participates in international and local projects for saving and digitising Sudanese films, including those of Ibrahim Shaddad, Suliman Ibrahim and El Tayeb Mahdi.

## **The protagonists**

### **Ibrahim Shaddad**

Ibrahim studied filmmaking at the Filmuniversität Babelsberg Konrad Wolf (at that time Academy for Film and Television of the GDR) and graduated in 1964. Over the course of his career, he has made many medium length and short films, among which *Hunting Party* (1964) and *The Rope* (1984). Several of his projects have been banned by the various governments in Sudan. He spent years in exile in Egypt and Canada before returning to Sudan. His love of cinema is deep and his vision of art is radical.

### **Manar Al-Hilo**

Manar graduated from the Cairo Higher Institute for Cinema in 1977. He was always dedicated to championing the works of his other friends. He worked on the production of all their films produced in Sudan. His smart wit persuasively found miraculous solutions to overcome production obstacles in a country without production means. He is a radical dreamer who loves cinema but does not cease to question the usefulness of its actions and the moral legitimacy of wanting to talk about cinema in a time of assassins and atrocities.

### **Suliman Ibrahim**

Suliman studied documentary filmmaking at the VGIK Institute of Cinematography in Moscow from 1973 to 1978. He was awarded the Silver Prize for his short film *It Still Rotates* at the Moscow International Film Festival 1979. He is the driving force of the group, very disciplined and inventive; he finds the answers to all the practical questions. He refused to go into exile following the military coup in 1989.

### **El Tayeb Mahdi**

El Tayeb graduated from the Cairo Higher Institute for Cinema in 1977. He has directed several artistically daring short films such as *The Station* (1988), *Four Times for Children* (1979), *The Tomb* (1976). El Tayeb is a man of few words but his brevity will always deliver the missing thought.

## **Production notes**

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## TALKING ABOUT TREES

*Directed by:* Suhaib Gasmelbari

©: Agat Films & Cie, Doha Film Institute, Sudanese Film Group, MADE IN GERMANY Filmproduktion, Goï-Goï Productions, Vidéo de Poche

*Production Company:* Agat Films & Cie

*In co-production with:* Goï-Goï Productions, MADE IN GERMANY Filmproduktion, Vidéo de Poche, Doha Film Institute

*In association with the:* Sudanese Film Group (SFG)

*With the support of:* L'Aide aux cinémas du monde - Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée

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*Realised with the support of the:* IDFA Bertha Fund, Creative Europe MEDIA, La Région Île-de-France, CNC, WCF - World Cinema Fund, Film- und Medienstiftung NRW, AFAC - The Arab Fund for Arts and Culture, Doha Film Institute, SANAD Development Grant, Final Cut in Venice Workshop

*Presented by:* Agat Films & Cie

*International Sales:* Wide House

*Produced by:* Marie Balducci

*Co-produced by:* Mahamat Saleh Haroun, Melanie Andernach

*Written by:* Suhaib Gasmelbari

*Photography:* Suhaib Gasmelbari

*Editors:* Nelly Quettier, Gladys Joujou

*Sound:* ElSadig Kamal, Katharina Von Schroeder

### With

Ibrahim Shaddad

Suliman Ibrahim

El Tayeb Mahdi

Manar Al-Hilo

Hana Abdelrahman Suliman

France/Sudan/Germany/Chad/Qatar/Netherlands/ Lebanon/United Arab Emirates/Italy 2019©

93 mins

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## THE TIME IS NEW:

### SELECTIONS FROM CONTEMPORARY ARAB CINEMA

#### The Man Who Sold His Skin (L'Homme qui a vendu sa peau)

Sat 4 Sep 17:40 (+ pre-recorded Q&A with director Kaouther Ben Hania);

Thu 16 Sep 20:50

#### 200 Meters

Tue 7 Sep 20:50; Wed 15 Sep 18:10

#### As Above, So Below (Kama fissamaa', kathalika ala al-ard)

Wed 8 Sep 20:45; Fri 1 Oct 18:10 (+ pre-recorded Q&A with director

Sarah Francis)

#### 143 Sahara Street (143 rue du désert)

Sat 11 Sep 11:30; Mon 20 Sep 18:15

#### It Must Be Heaven

Sat 11 Sep 20:40; Mon 27 Sep 18:00; Mon 4 Oct 14:30

#### Let's Talk Ehkeely

Mon 13 Sep 18:00 (+ pre-recorded Q&A with director Marianne Khoury);

Tue 5 Oct 20:50

#### Tlameess

Tue 14 Sep 20:40; Thu 30 Sep 18:00

#### Talking About Trees

Mon 20 Sep 14:30; Mon 27 Sep 20:45;

Sun 3 Oct 18:00

#### You Will Die at Twenty (Satamoto fel eshreen)

Thu 23 Sep 20:30 (+ pre-recorded Q&A with director Amjad Abu Alala);

Sat 2 Oct 14:20

#### Narrative Encounters: Shorts Programme

Fri 24 Sep 20:40; Tue 5 Oct 18:10

#### Adam

Sat 25 Sep 14:20; Mon 4 Oct 20:50

#### Abou Leila

Sun 26 Sep 18:00; Sat 2 Oct 20:30

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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

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