

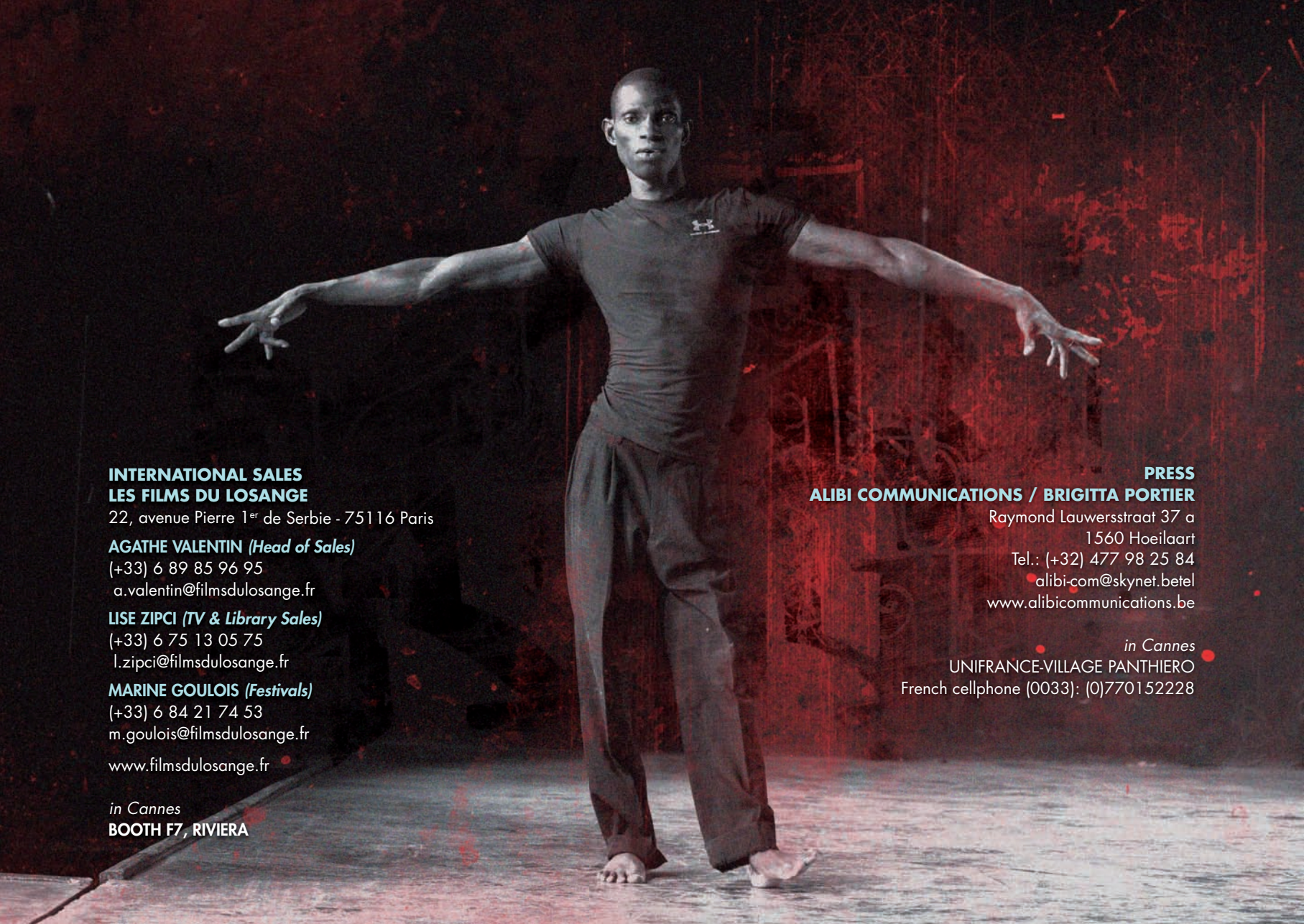


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FESTIVAL DE CANNES

# GRIGRIS

A FILM BY MAHAMAT-SALEH HAROUN





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**COMPETITION**  
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# GRIGRIS

A FILM BY

**MAHAMAT-SALEH HAROUN**



FRANCE - CHAD • 2013 • 1H41 • DCP • SCOPE • COLOR • SOUND : 5.1





Photo © Pili Films, Frank Veidler

## / **SYNOPSIS**

Despite a paralyzed leg that could have barred most avenues, Grigris, 25 year old, dreams of being a dancer. A challenge. But his dreams are dashed when his father-in-law falls critically ill. To save him, Grigris resolves to work for petrol traffickers...







Photo © Pili Films, Frank Verdier

## / INTERVIEW WITH MAHAMAT-SALEH HAROUN

### / How did you come up with *Grigris* ?

I wanted to make a film about those petrol smugglers I could see all over N'Djamena who got involved in car chases – they would load their cars with petrol cans and then get chased by customs officers. This is a widespread phenomenon that I wished to address in a crime film, while keeping away from the genre's clichés. In 2011, while I was attending the FESPACO Film Festival in Ouagadougou, I went to a show where I discovered Souleymane Démé, a dancer whose left leg was crippled. When he got on stage, I thought to myself « *That's the hero of the story I want to tell* ». I remember that back then he dyed his hair blonde and that there was something supernatural about him that drew me in. That encounter helped me come up with the storyline.

### / So the narrative was based on his own story?

It was to some degree since I knew he was going to play the lead. It was a comfortable process because I was familiar with his body language and his choreography, which helped me write the narrative. It didn't take long before I thought I had a convincing script as it had



Photo © Pili Films, Frank Verdier

a documentary quality about Souleymane Démé. However, I wanted to focus only on his dancing persona and how he came to dancing. I didn't want to find out too much about his background in order to make room for fiction. I usually like to start with true facts and then branch out to fiction which paves the way for questions and perspectives.

### / *Grigris* and *Mimi* are two castaways who carry the burden of their difference in their flesh.

That's right. They are both outcasts who find themselves in the same place – the shady realm of nightlife, where you can cross the line and where you try to survive in spite of suffering hardships and being aware that you've been relegated to some kind of no-go area. That connection between the two characters accounts for their mutual attraction. I'm always deeply moved by the kind of "community" you create for yourself when, at some point in life, you recognize yourself in others. Once they have met, they move towards building a kind of family and accepting themselves, no matter what challenges they have to overcome. You learn a lot about tolerance from their relationship.





**/ You've often taken an interest in dropouts and outcasts...**

Yes, I'd rather deal with the fringe than the mainstream, because the mainstream is all about affluence and happiness and because it is a position of privileged, upper-class people I have no use for. When you're in the mainstream, you're at peace and you tend to be conservative, both artistically and ideologically. On the other hand, the fringe is all about adventure and movement – and thus life itself – towards the mainstream. It is the fringe that is liable to irrigate and contaminate the mainstream. Just like the movement of rivers and streams going towards the sea, not the other way around.

**/ Did you tread into forbidden territory when you addressed prostitution in Africa?**

Yes indeed. It's amazing how hypocritical society is. However, my

role is to break social taboos in order to allow people to discuss them openly, accept the crude facts of life and challenge them. At any rate, these are my concerns as a Chadian film maker: I need to make breaches in this society, or else I would regard myself as too mainstream.

**/ Still your film includes some codes of the thriller genre.**

I wanted to revisit this movie genre by introducing a personal point of view and a typically Chadian situation and yet avoid the clichés. That's why I wanted first to immerse the viewer into a coded world and then to explore other less known territory – the dance theme allowed me to deconstruct the genre.

**/ The two main characters express their lust for life and yearning for freedom with their bodies...**

It is as though they were expressing their angst and their lust for life with their bodies because their bodies had been tainted by original sin. The reason they expose their bodies and even « abuse » them is that these bodies are the bearers of their difference and the source of their suffering. Mimi is of mixed race and Grigris is physically crippled – both are in essence « anomalous » creatures, social cripples and they mishandle the place in which their suffering is located, i.e. their bodies. They both have a love/hate relationship with their bodies. When Grigris is auditioned but fails to get the part, he blames his leg for holding him captive. And Mimi can't blend in with her people because of the colour of her skin and she must even wear an African style wig in order not to be excluded.







Photo © Pili Films, Frank Verdier

**/ Grigris has a very close relationship with his surrogate father.**

I like the idea that this relationship is not a blood relationship but rather a spiritual bond. When the « father » decides to bequeath his photo studio to Grigris because he is certain he can be a good photographer, this act symbolizes the strong bond that links them. Consequently, I didn't need long explanatory scenes to describe this bond. It is very clear and Grigris gives himself one mission – to save this man, his stepfather who played the role of a father throughout his lifetime.

**/ It is also a film about how some human beings control other human beings...**

This idea of control of some over others is crucial. Grigris is under the influence of his mother in a very subtle way and he regards it as his duty to provide for his family. Then he falls under the sway of thugs. Mimi is controlled by men and the thugs are under the sway of bosses. And finally there is mutual control, the villagers have a hold on the Mimi/Grigris couple and vice versa. They have duties toward one another because they are bound by a secret – it is exactly what happens within any ordinary family.

**/ There is a truly feminist approach in this story and in the characters' trajectory...**

Until this film I hadn't created any female role. In this film I pay tribute to all the women that I have met, the female villagers and the anonymous women who carry baskets on their heads and have no say on anything.

I also wished to create a community of self sufficient women, living without men, in a village where they settle their problems by themselves and thus set a wonderful example of solidarity. And they accept the coming child without any comment.

**/ The camera follows Grigris, never losing sight of him as if it were a documentary.**

I wanted to adopt his point of view and show a character constantly on the move, a character in search of something. So far I had shown characters trapped in situations that paralysed them. Here the protagonist is on the move, he is a « performer » as they say in the theatre – Grigris is constantly searching and I thought that following him as I did and assuming his point of view made us feel closer to him.

**/ How did you manage to avoid all feelings of pity for Grigris?**

From the very beginning I wanted to avoid falling into this trap. The challenge consisted in showing the handicap without commiseration, without looking down on Grigris. I had many talks with my cinematographer. I wanted Grigris to be shot at eye level, never belittling the protagonist, never hinting that he was not a « whole » human being. Consequently, he is perceived as an ordinary man, as a dancer with a disabled leg.

**/ How did you get to depict the atmosphere at night?**

I was inspired by the nights in N'Djamena. It is a town with very poor public lighting. I wanted to have the characters resemble ghost-like



Photo © Pili Films, Frank Verdier

figures against the African night. I focused on the contrast between the world of the night and that of the daytime. A feeling of secret illegality runs through the night and there is more emotional outpouring. It is a typically Chadian phenomenon – Chadian society is made up of a majority of Muslims for whom the worst criminal acts take place after sunset. I wanted to depict the flamboyance of this underground life and then get back to a kind of asceticism, which is characteristic of day life. Indeed one tends to let off steam at night but pretends to lead a dignified life in broad daylight. This polarity can be found in lots of people. I was inspired by a neighbourhood in N'Djamena where there were many prostitutes. When darkness fell, they turned into someone else to prepare for the appearance on stage of their « characters » and yet they behaved differently during the day to look more respectable.



**/ The film is both realistic and stylized...**

I wanted to speak of what it's like to be working in hard conditions, in the sewer for example, without stylized effects in order to show that we are not seeing a film set but real life, almost as if it were a documentary. On the other hand, I felt like shooting well designed, stylised long shots. The challenge consisted in combining the two approaches.

As a matter of fact, I enjoyed trying this risky approach to see if it was aesthetically appealing. And at the end of the day I realise that a strong narrative content provides the style of the movie.

**/ How did you approach your work on colours and particularly on reds?**

Frankly I tried to stick to the colours of the country. I visited several



Photo © Pili Films, Frank Verdier

rooms inhabited by single young women and realised that red was often present. Besides the room where we shot, which is supposed to be Mimi's room, is shown on screen just as it is in reality.

I guess that red symbolizes desire, attraction and blood in all cultures alike.

**/ The close shots of the city stand in contrast to the wide shots in the countryside...**

It was in order to show that the two protagonists could blossom in this rural environment. This environment also represents an opening for them. Suddenly a new horizon opens up thanks to the outpouring of solidarity, and with the prospect of a simple happy life near the river. This welcoming open space helps them to reconstruct themselves.

Conversely, close shots are more exclusory because they focus on one object and leave out the rest. When they lived in town, the two characters felt hemmed in because the others had a hold on them.

When they get into the countryside, Grigris tells Mimi « *you're just like the other women* ». There is a sense of recovered virginity and the prospect of turning a new page. Don't believe I am nostalgic for rural life! It is just another environment where there is such a thing as solidarity and mutual help.

**/ Tell us how you cast the actors.**

As Souleymane Démé is a dancer and a musician, he has a sense of rhythm. Besides Souleymane is a very physical actor. And I think that a good actor must have a sense of pace to play organically.



Photo © Pili Films, Frank Verdier





Photo © Pili Films, Frank Verder

During the rehearsals we focused on his choreography and on his way of moving. I didn't have to direct him a lot, I didn't have to spell out what I wanted him to do. At the beginning, when I asked him to cry in a particular scene, he answered that he never cried. And one day, while we were shooting a sequence in the park and he had to stroke his leg, he started to cry and said that it was no longer a film that was being shot but the story of his own life. From this moment it seems that he had totally internalized his character's story.

As to Anaïs Monory who plays Mimi, it was also her debut. I spotted her during a casting session and when I watched her audition she exuded such physicality and such freshness that I never had any doubt – out of a dozen actresses that I had met she was the only one who could play the scene in such an original and genuine way. I met up with her again and told her to put on lipstick and thought to myself « *this is the one* ». She reminded me of Youssouf Djaoro with whom I shot *A Screaming Man*, and *Daratt, A Dry Season* because she understood what I wanted right away.

Cyril Gueï, who plays Moussa, is an experienced actor. He studied at the Paris Academy of Dramatic Arts. We talked a lot about his character as the gang leader. We wanted the role to have a local tone and not suggest a gang leader from the Parisian suburbs. He managed to portray the character aptly while expressing terrifying violence.



Photo © Pili Films, Frank Verder

**/ The score seems to embrace the movement of the bodies.**

Wasis Diop, the musician with whom I worked on *Daratt, a Dry Season* and *A Screaming Man* came along with me when I visited Souleymane Démé in Ouagadougou. He composed the motifs according to the Choreography of Souleymane Démé.

Grigris dabbles in dancing, in photography, in fixing radios, in other words he has to be resourceful in order to survive. This forces him to be constantly on the move. And the score seeks to relate the everyday life of these ingenious survivors. ■

*Interview released in Paris, avril 2013*



## / CAST

Grigris **Souleymane DEME** • Mimi **Anaïs MONORY** • Moussa **Cyril GUEI** • Ayoub **Marius YELOLO** • The mother **Hadjé Fatimé N'GOUA** • Moussa's henchman **Abakar M'BAÏRO** • Alhadj **Youssouf DJAORO** • Fifi **Rémadiji Adèle NGARADOUMBAYE** • Grigris business manager **Emmanuel M' BAÏDE ROTOUBAM** • Mimi's friend **Achouackh ABAKAR** • Mimi's friend client **Abdel Salam MAHAMAT** • False witness **Ahidjo MOUSSA** • Casting choreographer **Ahmed TAÏGUE** • Drunk customer **Xavier GIROU** • Chinese woman **Lian XEHUA** • Little boy **Tom HAROUN** • Mimi's client **Cyrus NERSY** • With women of the **MAÏLAO VILLAGE WOMEN ASSOCIATION**

## / CREW

Written and directed by **Mahamat-Saleh HAROUN** • Script doctor **Jacques AKCHOTI** • D.O.P **Antoine HEBERLE, AFC** • Editing **Marie-Hélène DOZO** • Sound **André RIGAUT** • Sound editing **Bridget O'DRISCOLL** • Mix **Julien CLOQUET** • Set design **Ledoux MADEONA**, assisted by **Chérif Michel TADIDA** • Costumes **Anne-Marie GIACALONE** • Makeup **Nadine OTSOBOGO-BOUCHER** • Script supervisor **Louise ARHEX** • 1<sup>st</sup> Operator's assistant **Mathieu BERTHOLET** • 1<sup>st</sup> Director's assistant **François CHAILLOU** • 2<sup>nd</sup> Director's assistant **Emmanuel M' BAÏDE ROTOUBAM** • Musics and originals songs **Wasis DIOP** • Casting **Gigi AKOKA**, assisted by **Dany HERICOURT** • Set photograph **Frank VERDIER** • Lighting director **Grégoire SIMPORE** • Head grip **Roland NABA** • Foley artist **Bertrand BOUDAUD** • Color grader **Serge ANTONY** • Production manager France **Claude GILAIZEAU** • Production manager Chad **Sékou TRAORE** • Unit manager **Alidou BADINI**

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## / MAHAMAT-SALEH HAROUN

**M**ahamat-Saleh Haroun was born in 1960 in Chad. He studied film in Paris and journalism in Bordeaux. After writing for several years for many regional dailies, he wrote and directed his first short film **Maral Tanié** in 1994. In 2006, he won the Special Jury Award at the Venice Film Festival for his third feature, **Daratt, A dry season**. In the same year, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York paid tribute to Haroun by hosting a retrospective of his films. In 2010, his fourth feature, **A Screaming Man**, won the *Jury Prize* at the Cannes Film Festival. In the same year, he garnered the prestigious *Robert Bresson Award* at the Venice Film Festival, and the *Premio Humanidade* at the 34<sup>th</sup> Mostra in Sao Paulo, Brazil. He was a member of the Jury for the main competition at the Festival de Cannes in 2011. Shot in Chad in 2012, **Grigris** is his fifth feature.

### FEATURE FILMS:

2010 - **A Screaming Man** - Cannes Film Festival, Special Jury Prize • Best French-speaking Film / Lumière Award 2011 • Henri Langlois Award - Cinémas du Monde, d'ici & d'ailleurs 2011 • Fipresci Award / Sembene Ousmane Award / Yennenga Silver Stallion - Ouagadougou Festival 2011

2006 - **Daratt, a Dry Season** - Venice Film Festival, Special Jury Prize

2002 - **Abouna (Our Father)** - Directors' Fortnight, Cannes Film Festival

1999 - **Bye-bye Africa** - Venice Film Festival, Best First Feature

### TV FILMS:

2007 - **Sex, Okra and Salted Butter**, 90mn

### DOCUMENTARIES:

2005 - **Kalala**, 52 minutes

1996 - **Sotigui Kouyaté: A Modern Griot**, 58 mn

### OTHERS:

2008 - **Expectations**, short film, 30 mn, a Jeonju Film Festival - Special project

October 2007 / January 2008 - **Shadows**, A video experimental film for the Diaspora Exhibit at the Quai Branly Museum





