

Press Release

Abderrahmane Sissako discusses the importance of mentorship, making personal films like ‘Timbuktu’ and the use of humour in filmmaking at Qumra

Moderated by Jean-Michel Frodon, the session shared clips from Sissako’s multi-award winning ‘Timbuktu’ which screened to a sold-out audience Tuesday night and will screen again on Wednesday at the Katara Opera House

Doha, Qatar – 10 March, 2015: Mauritanian filmmaker Abderrahmane Sissako, whose Oscar-nominated feature ‘Timbuktu’ screened to a sold-out audience last night in Doha, talked in a master class on Tuesday about the importance of Qumra, the Doha Film Institute’s new event taking place this week which is dedicated to the mentorship and development of emerging filmmakers from Qatar and around the world.

“Qumra needs people who can listen and exchange expertise and ideas. In my culture master has a dual meaning because if you meet a young person in the street and you don’t know their name you call them master. It’s important because it shows that each person has the capacity to give the other something. I am not a master here (in Doha) but I am here to exchange ideas and expertise with younger people, other filmmakers.”

As one of the Qumra Masters, Sissako will also be mentoring eight filmmakers whose projects are participating in an intensive development programme including Abdullah Al-Mulla’s drama **Green Eyes** (Qatar), Saeed Al-Mannai’s drama **Bou Ejaila** (Qatar), Narimane Mari’s Algerian set drama **Madmen’s Fort** (Algeria, France, Qatar), Hend Fakhroo’s Qatari drama **Parijat** (Qatar), Nora Al Subai’s fantasy adventure **Beyond** (Qatar), Arab & Tarzan Abunasser’s female drama set in Gaza **Dégradé** (Palestine, France, Qatar), Meriem Mesraoua’s childhood drama **Our Time Is Running Out** and Mohammed Al Ibrahim’s pizza delivery drama **Pizza O Bass** (Qatar).

Sissako explained that cinema wasn’t considered a serious career in Mauritania where he was born, and that when he was 19, he had the opportunity to go to the Soviet Union to study cinema at the VGIK School in Moscow where he was mentored by a Russian filmmaker.

His first film at age 19, **Waiting for Happiness**, drew on his personal experience and the exact room living with his mother in Mauritania with low windows which meant he saw everything from that point of view – legs and feet of passers by – which he used in the film.

At film school he was exposed to world cinema. “I used to see a number of movies on a daily basis, it was mandatory, so I got to know the world of John Cassavetes, Luchino Visconti, Michelangelo Antonioni, Andrei Tarkovsky and Ingmar Bergman.”

“Visconti in his films portrayed life through the eyes of people on the street and in Mali growing up I knew a lot about the street, our house was on the street so I learnt that I too could tell stories about what happened in the street. It’s really important to start with what you know, what you have experienced,” he said.

When making **Life on Earth**, Sissako explained that when he decided to live back in France he wanted to show what life was really like. “For me, movies should have meaning so I decided to go back and tell what I knew, what I missed, to write a simple story and shoot simple scenes with people I knew. I wanted to show life that you don’t see every day, what actually happened on earth.”

‘Life on Earth’ started with a two-page script and a telephone booth, which existed in the village where they shot, and was used by people to keep in touch and communicate. “The telephone booth was where people came to call their parents and talk on the phone. They held it in their hands and I noticed they had a huge desire to communicate with each other and so I decided to shoot the movie around this idea.”

“We don’t have to look for stories that are distant to us, we can look for stories in our own home. I love cinema when it’s close to us. I like to shoot people who are fragile, vulnerable and I like to shoot a simple life – life is about looking for life.”

Speaking about **Timbuktu**, Sissako explained the scene in which the fisherman dies that he wanted to show “two people who are equally vulnerable. One kills the other accidentally. I wanted to show the vulnerability objectively.”

Sissako also talked about the use of non-actors in his films and said for him it’s not important they are actors – the fisherman in **Timbuktu** was a real fisherman the crew met when they reached the location. “Life is about meetings and remaining open to possibilities, this is the magic and complexity of the world of cinema. If I hadn’t been open, I wouldn’t have found this actor.”

In terms of his identity as an African filmmaker, Sissako said: “My African origin reflects the stories I tell but to call me an African filmmaker is a very Western idea. I think of myself as a Mauritanian filmmaker but I like to tell stories from Africa.”

Asked about the importance of technology in filmmaking, Sissako said it wasn’t that important. “What’s important is what story do you want to tell? It’s easy to buy a pencil but that doesn’t make you a writer, buying a camera doesn’t make you a filmmaker.”

Speaking about the strong female characters in **Timbuktu**, Sissako said he grew up in a society where women were very much respected and his strong and deep relationship with his mother was also a key factor in how he sees men and women. “I don’t have a division between men and women, to me I believe in human beings. Women as well as men have great responsibility in the world and play very important roles in their community and in society. Women have the

capacity to be modest and bold and courageous all at the same time. In **Timbuktu** you see a woman stand up to the jihadists. That's a choice I made, to show a way of peacefully resisting."

Talking of the use of humour in his movies, and in **Timbuktu** in particular," Sissako said: "A movie is a conversation, an hour and a half conversation and during this time people should enjoy and relate to what they have seen. Humour is part of our everyday life, even during a dramatic situation, even during war. Humour can humanise what is happening. So I give humour to characters, even bad characters."

An additional screening of **Timbuktu** was added to the Qumra screening programme due to the strong response from local audiences. It screens on Wednesday March 11 at 7pm at the Katara Drama Theatre. For ticket information go to dohafilminstitute.com

-ENDS-

About Qumra:

Qumra is an initiative that seeks to provide mentorship, nurturing and hands-on development for filmmakers from Qatar and around the world, alongside a series of screenings for Doha audiences featuring films by international masters and recipients of support from the Institute.

** The Arabic term 'qumra' is popularly said to be the origin of the word 'camera', and to have been used by the scientist, astronomer and mathematician Alhazen (Ibn al-Haytham, 965-c.1040 CE), whose work in optics laid out the principles of the camera obscura.*

About Doha Film Institute:

Doha Film Institute is an independent, not-for-profit cultural organisation. It supports the growth of the local film community through cultivating film appreciation, enhancing industry knowledge and contributing to the development of sustainable creative industries in Qatar. The Institute's platforms include funding and production of local, regional and international films; skills-sharing and mentorship programmes; film screenings; the Ajyal Youth Film Festival; and Qumra. With culture, community, learning and entertainment at its foundation, the Institute is committed to supporting Qatar's 2030 vision for the development of a knowledge-based economy.

Doha Film Institute

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