

## BIOGRAPHY

Abderrahmane Sissako is the director of the acclaimed "Life on Earth", which was presented at Cannes (Directors' Fortnight), Toronto, Sundance and New York. Born in 1961 in Mauritania, Sissako spent his childhood in Mali. He later spent six years in Moscow, where he studied at the VGIK film institute. In his shorts, documentaries and feature-length fiction films, Sissako has often explored the exile experience and the relationship between African and Western societies.

2001 WAITING FOR HAPPINESS (HEREMAKONO)  
 1999 LIFE ON EARTH  
 1997 ROSTOV-LUANDA (documentary)  
 1996 SABRYA (episode of "Africa Dreaming")  
 1995 THE CAMEL AND THE FLOATING STICKS (short)  
 1993 OCTOBER  
 1991 THE GAME (short)

## SYNOPSIS

Nouadhibou is a small seaside village on the Mauritanian coast. Amongst its white-washed buildings and melodic songs passed down through generations, lives intertwine while waiting for a hypothetical happiness...

Seventeen-year-old Abdallah visits his mother before emigrating to Europe. Unable to speak the local language, the melancholic young man finds himself a stranger in his own country. Traditional colorful fabrics interest him less than the latest European fashions. He shies away from village customs and festivities. Yet Abdallah observes this touching universe so unknown to him - sensual young woman Nana's sorrows; a Chinese immigrant's romantickaraoke; old handyman Maata's frustrations with faulty electrical hook-ups. And the orphaned young boy Khatra with his wide-eyed curiosity and natural ability to evoke hope and tenderness.



## NOTES FROM THE DIRECTOR

### HEREMAKONO

Nouadhibou is a transit city. One goes there to make a little money before taking off for somewhere else. I came to know this city before departing for Russia, where I studied at the Moscow National Film School (VGIK). The local Nouadhibou housing is temporary. In Mali, they are called "heremakono", which means "waiting for happiness."

### EXILE BEFORE THE VOYAGE

At the end of the film, when Abdallah leaves his mother's house to travel, he finds himself alone in the desert with his suitcase. This image of solitude represents for me that exile precedes the voyage. I was interested in the concept of passing through before going on to a place which may never be reached. The exile before the voyage. Already in exile, I started my voyage. Maybe waiting is actually the happiness.

### WITHOUT ROOTS

I wanted to tell the path of someone who is missing one of the principal codes to integrate into society and even more so all societies - that is language. A person can feel without roots in his or her own country. At the same time, if someone is lacking in language skills, although he loses out, his or her point of view becomes a mode of communication. The point of view sharpens and he pays closer attention to the world around him.

### NORTH-SOUTH RELATIONSHIP

There's a strong bond, sometimes touching, sometimes dramatic, between the North and the South. This bond unfortunately lends itself to an unequal relationship. Television contributes to introducing an outside culture to the detriment of an existing culture. One of the dramas of Africa is that its people are rarely confronted by its own image. Turning on the television there means only seeing Europe and the Western world. From this state of things results an acculturation, the new arms of a dominante society.

### BODIES WASHED ASHORE

The feeling of not being able to go "over there" toward another life, of being deprived of one's human freedoms -- this is a feeling which is familiar to us Africans. The sea rejecting a body on the shores of Nouadhibou, of Tangiers or of Tarifa symbolizes the refusal of one civilization to another. This refusal of us is a violence that is not spoken about. But there aren't only bodies that wash ashore, there is also light. The lightbulb that washes ashore scintillates witness to the fragile hope of what is life.



### PASSING DOWN OF KNOWLEDGE

The passing down of songs from generation to generation is mostly an allusion to the principle of apprenticeship. This expresses that everything we do is repetition. Creation consists of getting closer to something which interests and fascinates us. The young apprentice might have a more beautiful voice than her teacher, but she is fascinated by this older woman who is transmitting something to her. Like between old Maata and the young boy - the passing down of knowledge is a metaphor for life.

### FOCUS ON COLORS

This is the reflection of a location. I wanted to be faithful to this place. The costumes of people also tell about the optimism of those people. Despite the difficulties, this place is also a place of happiness and tranquility, almost eternal.



### MORE OF A STUDENT THAN A TEACHER

I gave importance to improvisation. The director is more of a student than a teacher when working with non-professional actors and filming in a place never before explored on film. One is less of a director and more of an attentive spectator when he tries to take advantage of the human qualities of another's improvisation. Every day, it was necessary to be open to life.