

Source URL: <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/last-hijack-berlin-review-678592>

The Last Hijack: Berlin Review

10:47 AM PST 2/8/2014 by Deborah Young



The Bottom Line

A insightful look into the origins of Somalia's piracy epidemic creatively uses animation to go deeper.

Venue

Berlin Film Festival (Panorama Doc), Feb. 8, 2014

Directors

Femke Wolting, Tommy Pallotta

Imaginative animated sequences enliven a behind-the-scenes documentary about piracy in Somalia.

Playing like the backstory to *Captain Phillips*, **Femke Wolting** and **Tommy Pallotta's** *Last Hijack* is a serious documentary exploration of the phenomenon of piracy in Somalia. Its extraordinary added value is recurrent sequences of animation that go where no camera can, recreating scenes of ship-boarding and violence. The story of Mohamed, who leaves behind his normal life for the money and excitement of piracy, is illuminating, even if he is never a terribly sympathetic character that the viewer can warm up to. Only through the traumas undergone by his younger cartoon self do the choices he makes become understandable. The Match Factory title should stand a better than average chance of pickups during its festival shelf life.

Animation offers the filmmakers a chance to leave reality behind and create a powerful

symbol of piracy in a giant bird of prey who grasps a cargo ship in its talons and flies off with it. Pallotta, who produced **Richard Linklater**'s seminal *Waking Life*, and Wolting, who has produced **Peter Greenaway** films, are confident in shifting from live action to cartoon versions of the protags. The film lacks a strong structure, however, and at times relies too heavily on these whimsical inserts to refocus audience attention.

Against his parents' wishes, Mohamed abandoned his village life to sign up with a band of pirates. He braves the danger of setting off to sea in pursuit of huge oil tankers and foreign cargo ships, and in their small boat they seem like a rubber raft challenging a whale. But they strike it lucky the first time out, capturing a big ship without firing a shot. The crew is ransomed for \$1.85 million.

At first, Mohamed explains, he was seen as a village hero and his exploits earned him respect: "from pauper to president." But as time goes by and more and more fishermen-turned-pirates are killed and jailed, and the recruitment of high school kids begins, the tide of popular sentiment turns against them. The film offers the impressive statistic that only 2 percent of the pirates who started ten years ago are still alive and free men. There is a sense that things are changing; if once the pirates ventured into the Red Sea and Indian Ocean to attack up to three ships at a time and "every man in Somalia wanted to become a pirate," Mohamed says that now it's easy to get caught and people are against them.

Mohamed himself takes a break to get married to a young girl who is adamantly opposed to piracy and urges him to make money legally, even if it means working in a stone quarry. Like any gang, it's easy come, easy go with money squandered on new cars, hotel rooms and women. The pirates keep only 15 percent of their booty, with the rest going abroad to negotiators and middle-men. Then it's back to the sea and new targets.

Mohamed's elderly father begs and threatens him to give up the pirate's life, but his words fall on deaf ears. Animated sequences reconstruct the tragedy that forced the family off their land and into the city, and the terrors of the tribal warfare that followed. It's easy to empathize with young Mohamed, who seems like a different person from his older real-life counterpart, who the filmmakers visually transform into a merciless animal, a bird of prey.

Another important, positive voice in the film is a radio announcer who runs an anti-piracy station. The radio has been attacked three times, once with a hand grenade, and two journalists have been murdered. Still he risks his life to get out the message.

This is a doc focused on people and their faces smiling even when tense, which tell the story better than the dry stone village and empty beaches. Kreidler's synthesized score offers apt accompaniment.

Venue: Berlin Film Festival (Panorama), Feb. 8, 2014.

Production companies: Submarine, Irish Film Board in association with Still Films, Razor Film, Savage Film, Jamal Media, Ikon, ZDF

Directors/Screenwriters: Femke Wolting, Tommy Pallotta

Producers: Bruno Felix, Femke Wolting

Co-producers: Nicky Gogan, Gerhard Meixner, Roman Paul, Bart Van Langendonck

Director of photography: Ahmed Farah

Editor: Edgar Burcksen

Music: Kreidler

Sales Agent: The Match Factory

No rating, 83 minutes.

Links:

- [1] <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/midnight-berlin-review-678529>
 - [2] <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/gueros-berlin-review-678437>
 - [3] <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/two-men-town-berlin-review-678244>
 - [4] <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movie/captain-phillips/review/623141>
-
-