

Berlin Film Review: 'Last Hijack'



FEBRUARY 8, 2014 | 12:43AM PT

Blending documentary, animation and narrative, Femke Wolting and Tommy Pallotta craft an experimental portrait of a Somali pirate.

Jay Weissberg (<http://variety.com/author/jay-weissberg/>)

Producer-directors [Femke Wolting](http://variety.com/t/femke-wolting/) and [Tommy Pallotta](http://variety.com/t/tommy-pallotta/), both with impressive credits in features and docus, team up for "[Last Hijack](http://variety.com/t/last-hijack/)," a semi-animated "nonfiction narrative" that reps a rare cinematic attempt to deal with Somali piracy from a pirate's side (following hot on the heels of the Sundance prize-winning drama "Fishing Without Nets").

staged scenes with documentary material and handsome animation by Hisko Hulsing (“Junkyard”), hoping to convey the reasons behind the kind of piracy seen in “Captain Phillips.” Hulsing’s illustrations suggest a depth to pirate Mohamed Nura that remains hidden in the flesh, though festivals and possibly Euro arthouses will find subject and form interesting.

Wolting’s producer credits encompass “Meet the Fokkens” and Peter Greenaway’s “Rembrandt’s J’Accuse,” while Pallotta’s include Richard Linklater’s “Waking Life” and “A Scanner Darkly.” Given the amount of media attention Somali piracy has received in recent years, it’s somewhat surprising that few have tried to show the other side, though with Somalia topping the list as the world’s most dangerous country, it’s a miracle the helmers found insurance money for the project.

Their aim is a little “Waltz with Bashir,” a little “The Act of Killing,” using an artificial device — animation — to illustrate events and emotions that otherwise could never be filmed. Certainly these sequences are the pic’s best parts, intriguingly delving into Nura’s past, from childhood traumas to the excitement of his first hijacking. It’s impossible to know when he’s acting and when he’s simply responding to the directors’ prompts: Surely scenes of him gathering cohorts for another sea raid is a re-enactment or wholesale invention “informed” by truth. Since it’s hard to tell, it calls into question the validity of such hybrid forms, where claims of striving for authenticity feel akin to a shell game.

“Last Hijack” briefly contextualizes the rush to piracy by Somali men, explaining how small fishing boats retaliated against the large foreign trawlers that were destroying their livelihood. Locals saw it as a Robin Hood gesture, and the instigators were treated like heroes; soon hijacking became an extremely lucrative profession, and with the country’s collapsed infrastructure further crippled by internecine fighting, piracy was a tempting road to temporary riches. The first major ransom paid was \$1.85 million, with no bullets fired: hard to resist when the alternative was small-time fishing.

Nura's parents say they weren't poor, yet piracy's temptations — their son drives a flashy Toyota Land Rover in a country whose per capita GDP is around \$112 — were too strong. The editing between past and present doesn't always keep the timeline clear, but when the helmers meet him, Nura is promising his family he'll stay away from the high seas. Everyone hopes his marriage to Muna Abdelkadir Mirre will keep him straight, but clearly the benefits from hijacking act as a siren call.

Animated sequences fill in pieces from Nura's childhood, when he witnessed floods, drought and, most disturbingly, his desperate father robbing passing vehicles at gunpoint. His avatar winces, clearly affected by such events, though his live-action counterpart seems unmoved by it all. Could it be the khat he's chewing? Or is it that Nura, whether victim of circumstance or not, isn't the sympathetic guy Wolting and Pallotta paint him to be? The other side is told by journalist and radio activist Abdifatah Omar Gedi, whose program maintains an anti-piracy thrust to counter tales of excitement and glamour.

Hulsing's artwork resembles the best children's illustrations, painterly with judicious use of just a few bold colors for contrast and clarity. Visuals in the live-action sequences also have an advanced palette, with celadon seas made almost three-dimensional by well-chosen lenses.

Berlin Film Review: 'Last Hijack'

Reviewed at Berlin Film Festival (Panorama), Feb. 7, 2014. Running time: **83 MIN.**

Production

(Netherlands-Ireland-Germany-Belgium) A Submarine presentation of a Submarine, Still Films, Razor Film, Savage Film, Jamal Media, Ikon, ZDF production, in association with the Irish Film Board, Les Films d'Ici, with the participation of Planete Plus, RTS Radio Television Suisse. (International sales: the Match Factory, Cologne, Germany.) Produced by Bruno Felix, Femke Wolting. Co-producers, Nicky Gogan, Gerhard Meixner, Roman Paul, Bart van Langendonck.

Crew

Directed, written by Femke Wolting, Tommy Pallotta. Camera (color), Ahmed Farah; editor, Edgar Burcksen; music, Kreidler; sound (5.1), Andreas Hildebrandt; animation supervisor, Gavin Kelly; paintings/visual development, Hisko Hulsing; associate producers, Lucia Haslauer, Isa Ostertag, Lucas Schmidt, Charlotte Uzu; line producer, Janneke van de Kerkhof.

With

Mohamed Nura, Nur Farax, Muna Abdelkadir Mirre, Abdifatah Omar Gedi. (Somali dialogue)