

Oscar Shorts 2018: Watu Wote: All of us

[Emily Taylor](#) takes a look at one of the more politically-charged films on the Oscar shortlist

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*With cinema's most-hyped awards show creeping up on us, **Nouse** turns its attention to an oft-ignored Academy Award: Best Live-Action Short Film. With access to several of the 10 films that have made the Oscars shortlist, our team will be tackling them in a series of interviews and reviews. From thrillers with timely racial commentary to dance dramas, there is plenty of wonderful work to see on the shortlist. The final five nominees will be announced on 23rd January.*



Image: Ginger Ink Films

Director: Katja Benrath

Starring: Barkhad Abdirahman, Faysal Ahmed, Mahad Ahmed

The situation in Kenya and the threat of the Al-Shabaab terrorist group and the horror they cause is something that I am shamefully mostly ignorant of. Although it sometimes hits the headlines, the complexities of the situation are often ignored in favour of crises closer to home. For well over a decade Kenya has been targeted by the terrorist group Al-Shabaab. Between 2008 and 2015 a total of 272 attacks were executed in Kenya. Partly due to this, a growing animosity has escalated between Christians and Muslims. The film is based on the Mandera bus attack that occurred in 2015. It follows a young Christian woman as she makes the treacherous 31 hour bus journey travelling to the town of Mandera, near the Somali border.



Image: Ginger Ink Films

One of the film's strongest points is that whilst telling a story very specific to its context both historically and geographically, its themes resonate beyond it. The theme of religious conflict not only pertinent to the situation in Kenya but one that strikes a chord with people at home. There have been countless news stories in 2017 of religious-based hate attacks in Britain as well as the rest of the world. This film manages to tell its story as truthfully as it can whilst also being incredibly accessible to a lay person as a viewer. It's a story of humanity rather than politics. "Watu Wote" being Swahili for "everyone", making the title "Everyone: All of us". Unity as a theme not only being in the film but also in the development of it, two languages side by side in the title, a German production about Kenya with a Kenyan cast. It's a great example of how diverse filmmaking only goes to strengthen the films made.

The performances are unanimously great, working together fantastically as an ensemble piece. Coupled with Katja Benrath's documentary-like direction, they allow the audience to waste no time in being on board with the narrative, often a difficulty with short films.

There is also some stunning cinematography from Felix Striegel contrasting the beautiful wide landscape shots with the claustrophobic scenes on board the crammed bus. The opening shots of desolate streets recall a dystopic vision of the country whilst the images of the bustling and vibrant villages suggest a more hopeful vision of the future. Both only serve to emphasise the isolation of the main character, who seems utterly alone whilst wandering the vast empty streets but even more so whilst wandering the bustling villages - unable to know who will attack her because of her faith. The sparse, but carefully crafted, dialogue also helps to serve this purpose. It's a film that wastes very little of its brief run time.



Image: Ginger Ink Films

It's a story ideal for a short film, never treading into the clichés that normally litter cinematic depictions of true life events. Very little backstory is given to the characters; they are all simply people in the wrong place at the wrong time but who came together to do the right thing. It's an attempt to capture a moment of history rather than to condense the conflict in Kenya down to a single narrative, which would be an unattainable feat. Its simplicity in allowing the one event to take precedent makes the film incredibly impactful.

Moreover this film is a masterful tonal balance in only around 20 minutes; it's harrowing without being exploitative, hopeful without being overly sentimental, dark without being cynical. It balances the difficult subject matter without sacrificing the hopeful core of the film. It teaches us to react with hatred not with more hatred, but finding resistance in kindness.



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