

TIMBUKTU

FRANCE/MAURITANIA 2014, 96 MIN

ABDERRAHMANÉ SISSAKO



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Timbuktu, by the Malian director Abderrahmane Sissako, is a wrenching tragic fable, Aesop-like in its moral clarity, about all the injustices Sharia law can wreak. It's also gorgeous. Few tracts about religious intolerance have ever been this alive to the beauty in their world – the play of late-evening sunlight across a lake, the nimble joy of a football game the authorities want banned.

In the dunes outside Timbuktu, a cattle farmer called Kidane, played with sad nobility by Ibrahim Ahmed, has built a life with his wife, Satima (Toulou Kiki), their 12-year-old daughter, and a young shepherd boy. Kidane plucks a guitar at night, and their tent feels like a sacred haven under the stars.

Sissako's vision is so offhandedly seductive, it's a while before you realise what a threat is gathering, and from where. It comes from the armed jihadis prowling the streets on motorbikes, issuing edicts about the forbidden pleasures of cigarette smoking, music, football. They enter a mosque, fully armed, and expect the very term jihad to act as some kind of holy password.

Sissako keeps melodrama at bay using the skittish, fragmentary rhythms he's chosen. Minor characters drift in and out without announcing themselves as minor. There's a town witch, trailing a wild multi-coloured ensemble behind her, and cackling as if the hen she's carrying were capable of ventriloquism. Jihadi recruits debate the relative merits of Zidane and Messi.

There are driving lessons in the desert, and a camcorder monologue where one young guy, his eyes darting and awkward, talks about turning his back on rap music and a life of sin.

Then something irreversible happens. One of Kidane's cows stumbles into the nets of Amadou, a temperamental fisherman, and the latter spears it to death. If this sequence is faked, it's faked astonishingly. The two men face off on the lake, and Sissako treats us to a long, breathtaking widescreen vista, from way back, of Kidane stumbling his way to the other side after a gun has gone off.

Sissako says he was inspired, if that's the word, by the horrifying public stoning in 2012 of an unmarried couple in the town of Aguelhok. His film shows merely a glimpse of a stoning, for a fraction of a second, but it's enough – the point is made earlier and more figuratively, with pot-shots at a group of fragile tribal statues, standing in the sand, their faces and limbs splintered into shards.

This is in no way the remorselessly grim film its subject matter might lead you to expect – it's full of life, irony, poetry and bitter unfairness. It demands respect, but it also earns it.

Tim Robey, The Telegraph

WRITING CREDITS: Abderrahmane Sissako & Kessen Tall **CINEMATOGRAPHY:** Sofian El Fani **MUSIC:** Amin Bouhafa

CAST: Kidane Ibrahim Ahmed | Abdelkerim Abel Jafri | Satima Toulou Kiki | Toya Layla Walet Mohamed

VOTING FOR *Tangerines* A68 | B15 | C2 | D0 | E0 | Rating 94.4% | Attendance 95

This is the last film in our current season.

We shall return in the autumn with more world cinema to entertain, excite & enlighten you!