

FILM REVIEW: LIVE AND BECOME

Maria Demeke*

Release: 2005

Language: English, Hebrew, French, Amharic (with English subtitles)

Live and Become tells an epic story of survival, isolation and enduring courage. Airlifted from a refugee camp in Sudan, an eight-year-old Ethiopian boy escapes famine, but can he bear separation from his mother, his religion and his homeland? The film explores the universal plight of refugees through one young man's poignant experience.



In 1984 at the height of the famine, thousands of Ethiopians traveled across the region to refugee camps in Sudan to escape the famine. At the same time, Israeli officials launched Operation Moses, a covert initiative to transport 8,000 Falasha (Ethiopian Jews) to Israel. Approximately 3,000 Falasha were transported to Israel where the government tried to systematically integrate them into society. The movie begins in a crowded Sudanese refugee camp, where one mother surrounded by death forces her son to pass as a Jew and depart for Israel, her only instructions: “Go, Live and Become.” The story follows him as he struggles to follow her instructions. Go and Live prove a challenge, but the real heart of the story is how and what will he become in a foreign land.

The opening sequence follows the young boy from the refugee camp to Israel; the tone is set for a profound story, which places humanity at the center of each scene. As young Schlomo arrives

* Maria Demeke is a Master in Public Policy Candidate (2007) at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Her work experience includes economic development in Ethiopia and advancing freedom of press in the Horn of Africa.

in Israel, you are immediately drawn into the young boy's struggle between his desperate desire to return home and his will to thrive in the new society. The inner turmoil of passing himself off as a Jewish orphan, coupled with racism and maltreatment are intensified as he yearns to contact his mother and return home. The film follows Schlomo to adulthood; his struggles to embrace his new mother (after being adopted into a liberal Israeli family), to combat racism, to love, and to reconcile his identity.

At times, it feels the film is taking on too much; assimilation, adoption, religion, racism and love; but these issues are all relevant to the refugee experience so it would be naive to ignore them. The film successfully keeps current politics as background and remains surprisingly non-partisan on a number of politically sensitive issues.

The potential for melodrama looms, but the film subtly handles complex issues with little sentimentality. The ability to pull off this intricate drama is no doubt a consequence of the actors' and director's intimacy with the topic. Ethiopian-Jew Sirak M. Sabahat (who co-directed and plays adult Schlomo) migrated to Israel in 1991 at the age of eleven. The Jewish writer/director Radu Mihaileanu (his communist father changed the family name to obscure the provocative racial affiliation) fled his oppressive native Romania via Israel in 1980 to work in France. Although the technical and cinematic components of the movie are weak (especially in the Ethiopian scenes), the emotional authenticity of the project is always evident.

One of the highlights of the film is the brilliant performance by Moshe Agazai, who plays Schlomo as a young boy. His intensity, sensitivity and profoundly regal demeanor bring a distinctly Ethiopian identity to the film. Although the film focuses on a specific moment in history, it successfully gives life to the omnipresent issues of migration, assimilation and isolation across all societies. "Live and Become" is brave and compassionate. It gives historical insight and moral weight to the exodus and reconciliation of one boy between two lands.

The film has received the Audience Award, European Cinema Award, Ecumenical Award Berlin Film Festival 2005 and the Golden Swan (Best Film) and Best Screenplay at the Copenhagen International Film Festival 2005. Its US debut was in Boston and it is scheduled to tour major cities

in the US through 2006 and early 2007.