

PROMISED SKY

AÏSSA MAÏGA — LAETITIA KY — DEBORA LOBE NANEY

DIRECTED BY ERIGE SEHIRI WRITTEN BY ERIGE SEHIRI ANNA CENNIK MALIKA CÉCILE LOUATI PRODUCED BY DJADAR DOMEIRI ERIGE SEHIRI MUSIC BY FRIDA MARZOUK AFC EDITING: NADIA BEN RACHID COSTUME DESIGNER: VALENTIN HADJAJOU VISUAL EFFECTS SUPERVISOR: SOPHIE DAVIN EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: AYMEN LAABIDI ALEXIS JUNG SIMON APOSTOLOU SET DESIGNER: AMEL BEZGOU COSTUME DESIGNER: IMEN KHALLEDI LINE PRODUCER: JULIEN AUER YASMINE GHOUKAR
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FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2025 OFFICIAL SELECTION
UN CERTAIN REGARD
OPENING FILM





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UN CERTAIN REGARD
OPENING FILM

2025 – DRAMA – FRANCE, TUNISIA, QATAR – FRENCH, ARABIC
SCOPE – 24FPS – 2K – SOUND 5.1

DURATION : 95 MINUTES

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SYNOPSIS

An Ivorian pastor and former journalist, Marie, opens her home in Tunisia to three generations of migrant women: Naney, Jolie, and Kenza. A mother desperate to obtain residency status in Tunisia, Naney seeks a better life for herself and her daughter. Jolie, in Tunisia on a student visa, feels burdened by her family's expectations for her future. Kenza, an orphaned child and the only survivor of a shipwreck carrying refugees to Tunisia, is lost and in need of a mother. Marie struggles with her role as a spiritual leader while assuming the role of Kenza's caregiver and supporting Naney and Jolie. As the four women grow closer in this makeshift family, they must grapple with poverty, conflict, and alienation.

Erige Sehir's *PROMISED SKY* is a "bittersweet celebration of endurance and sacrifice" (*Screen Daily*), demonstrating the importance of resilience, friendship and human connection in the face of global tensions surrounding migration and refugee crises worldwide.

INTERVIEW WITH ERIGE SEHIRI

Following your first movie, UNDER THE FIG TREES, how did you approach writing and directing PROMISED SKY ?

As I usually do : to me, it's about making invisible people visible. Historically, Tunisia was part of a region called Ifriqiya during the Roman and Arab-Muslim Empires. The term "Africa" comes from there ; it was actually the name of a region before becoming the name of the whole continent. Through this word, now more than ever, we must remember that Africa's history and identity are also deeply rooted in Tunisia.

In 2016, while I was doing research for a documentary short commissioned by the Inkyfada media group (STUDENTS, 2018), I ran into a group of young people coming from Sub-Saharan Africa, who came to Tunisia to pursue their studies, way before the massive immigration wave to Europe. They were from Senegal, Congo, the Ivory Coast, and they all had different backgrounds. Quite naturally, I became interested in these communities. We tend to forget that the vast majority of African migrants, about 80% of them actually, are traveling within the borders of the continent. Only 20% of them emigrate to Europe.

What was intriguing to me was that they lived in a parallel world : they had their own bars (they call them MAQUIS), their own night clubs, their own shops and their own churches. By turning the buildings they live in into evangelical churches, I could see that they were trying to stick together and to recreate social links. It was the same thing with the first Mosques in France. Churchgoers attend those places not only to pray, but mostly to protect themselves from the harsh reality they live in.

PROMISED SKY echoes the recent statement of the President of Tunisia about migrants. Were you aware that you were documenting such a burning issue ?

I began to work on the film way before things evolved in that direction. At first, it was not my intention to document what was happening in Tunisia, but over time, the movie began to mirror the political situation of the country. The story we were writing was caught up by reality.

With mass arrests and raids taking place all around Tunisia, we began to ask ourselves : how can we breathe these tensions into our story without turning our characters into outdated, reductive stereotypes ? We were trying to have some perspective on what was happening, to avoid any unnecessary violence on screen. We wanted to see these women live their lives, in spite of everything.

Based on your field work, how did you come up with these four female characters -Marie, the female Pastor, Jolie, the student, Naney, and Kenza, the little girl who survived a migrant shipwreck in the Mediterranean sea ?

I thought of Marie's character after meeting a Ivorian journalist. She had been living in Tunisia for a long time and she played an active part in the Tunisian civil society. I found out that she was also a Pastor and that she had just opened her own church. I thought that it was fascinating, her moving from one job to another -almost as if she felt like she was more useful as a Pastor than as a journalist.

Jolie's character directly comes from my encounter with Sub-saharan students from Tunis. Out of the four characters, Jodie is the only one who has proper papers. She is focused on her studies and she doesn't relate to the community of migrants she's living in, until she begins to face the same violence as them.

The idea of Naney's character occurred to me as soon as I met Debora Naney. I liked her so much that I wanted to give her a part in the movie. To me, she embodies the fate of all these women who came to Tunisia by themselves, leaving their children behind them. I've been gathering their stories throughout the casting process. But Debora Naney was different. She refused to work as a maid or a



nanny to earn her living, she was hanging out with Tunisian people, she even spoke Tunisian a little ; she was strong and vulnerable at the same time, and she had a great sense of humor.

Kenza, the little girl, was actually a late addition to the story -only a few weeks before we began shooting. While I was going to church and mingling with the believers, I met migrants who then tried to cross the Mediterranean sea. In some cases, I never heard from them again... In this group, there was a five-years-old little girl who died in a shipwreck. I was devastated when I heard that she passed away, and I wanted to bring her back to life and to pay her a tribute through Kenza's character. I wanted this tragedy to be at the heart of the film, like a ghost haunting these women's destiny.

The three women are transformed by their relationship with this little girl -especially Marie, who wants her to remain by her side, within the parish. Naney also pictures herself leaving the country with the child, and helping her settle in Europe.

All these women are poorly integrated in the country they live in. Whether it's Marie, Jolie or Naney, whose daughter is still in the Ivory Coast, none of them are in contact with their families. At best, they are waiting to hear from them. In a way, as an orphan who comes from an unknown background -even though she was probably born in Tunisia, Kenza is everybody's child. She puts the loneliness of these women in perspective, and questions their relationship to motherhood, their future and their place in the country. Simply by existing, she brings those characters together, even though everything drives them apart, and she forces them to make choices. She symbolizes something different for each of them : she's a danger for Marie, a challenge for Naney, a consolation prize for Jolie. We oscillate between solidarity and individuality, together but each on our own.

There's this very intense scene, when the little girl falls asleep while Marie is painting her a picture of her future. It echoes the opening scene, in which Kenza is speaking.

It was a very emotional moment for us when we were shooting, and I hope it will be as emotional on screen as well. Kenza is a little girl who has endured many traumas, as shown in the bath scene at the beginning of the film. Even if we can't see it, it's here. As a documentary filmmaker, I met a lot of people who had been through traumatic events. Very often, in the middle of our conversation, they decided to go to bed. Sometimes, they were even falling asleep while we were talking. It's something that really struck me, and I wanted the separation scene to reflect that. When something is too hard to hear, we disconnect ourselves from reality.

Even though Marie, Naney and Jolie live together, they have very different goals. Jolie doesn't feel at ease with them, almost as if she was trapped, including from a financial point of view, and she'd like to be more independent. Marie is already settle in Tunisia, her new country, while Naney is still transitioning : she doesn't know what her future will be made of, she hesitates between staying in Tunisia or attempting to cross the sea.

When I started to write the film, Marie and Jolie were the only characters I had in mind. Naney appeared later, and then Kenza came up as well. Just like in UNDER THE FIG TREES, I wanted to do an ensemble movie, to create a group picture. While writing, I often wondered what memories of the moments we share together remain when life pulls us apart.

Surrounding those three women and this little girl are a few Tunisian male characters, from Marie's landlord to Foued, Naney's friend and partner in crime.

The landlord character is played by this great Tunisian actor named Mohamed Grayaâ, who starred in Meryam Joobeur's WHO DO I BELONG TO (2024) and Youssef Chebbi's ASHKAL (2020). He is one of these Tunisian people who used to rent rooms to Subsaharians migrants without thinking about it, until one day, it was forbidden by the local authorities and they began to feel threatened.

As for Foued, he never talks about the situation; he just lives his life, without any interest in what's happening around him. Just like many Tunisians, he

was badly hit by the economic crisis. He's unemployed, he's a bit lost in his life, and he takes advantage of every opportunity he has to make a living. The connection he has with Naney is very uncertain, it's more about how complex it is to bond with others than true friendship.

The scene when he rides a scooter with Naney speaks volume about his character : it's not really a gift.

This is such a good example of how magical shooting a film can be, because we didn't write this scene. It was actually my birthday, the crew had made me a cake, and I thought to myself : this should be in the movie ! At first, I thought about making it Kenza's birthday, because she doesn't know when she was born, so it could have been a very moving scene. Then, I thought of Naney, this grown woman who is also an orphan, and who is not used to receiving gifts. I feel like I can relate to her disappointment. As a Tunisian woman myself, I'm deeply frustrated to see that we can't welcome migrants with dignity, even though we're from a country with such a wide diaspora ourselves. We act as if all of us weren't living on the same continent, as if all of us weren't Africans.

There's also Marie's blind friend, this beautiful character who gives her advice, offers her guidance and sees right through her, as if he was some sort of oracle.

I thought of this character while we were already shooting. He's played by Blamassi Touré, who is not a professional actor, but who's very big in the Tunisian civil movement, and who advocates for human rights. He's been living in Tunisia for fifteen years and I've known him for ten. He can't see, and I wanted him to embody the concept of the Blind Law. Since he's called Noa, there is also another biblical reference here ; he's a symbol. I also wanted him in the movie because he tells us something different about Marie, especially in the scene where he tells her : "Look at me !". He can't see her, but he can feel her. He knows her past like nobody else, and at the same time, he's also aware of the political context beyond Marie's own story, and he wants to protect her. If Marie were to keep Kenza with her, she could be in danger, because evangelical churches in Tunisia are often accused of child trafficking, in addition to being perceived as homes for illegal migrants.



Can you tell us about how you cast the main actresses ? Aïssa Maïga plays the female Pastor, Laetitia Ky plays the student -after starring in Philippe Lacôte's KING'S NIGHT (2020) and Giacomo Abbruzzese's DISCO BOY, and Debora Love Naney actually went from extra to lead actress.

For a very long time, after UNDER THE FIG TREES, I wanted to cast a real female Pastor for Marie's part. I actually worked with one for a year. But as a Pastor, she wanted everything she did to look faultless, which made it difficult for me to dig deeper. To have more freedom, I decided to give the part to a professional actress. I was looking for someone charismatic, someone with convictions, and I thought of Aïssa Maïga. She did a screen test for the preaching scene in the church, in front of real believers. She had little time to prepare and had to improvise a lot. She had to create a relationship with the child and with the religious community very quickly. These were unforgettable moments. What was interesting to me about this character was that she was an entrepreneur. She runs her church like a business. Aïssa

Maïga's performance enabled me to create a character that is both a believer and a woman of her time.

On the other hand, I discovered the work of Laetitia Ky on Instagram. As an artist, she's very skillful, very professional, and I really like what she does. I went to visit her in Abidjan for a screen-test, and I told her that I wanted to write a part just for her. She was comfortable in front of the camera and she brought something very relevant to the movie. I was very impressed.

As for Debora Love Naney, it was she who came to me ; when I met her, she was about to cross the Mediterranean sea. I really wanted to work with her, but making a movie takes time. We didn't have enough money to start the shoot, and she was rushing it. She used to tell me : "If we're not doing anything, I'm leaving". Cinema was very abstract to her. She needed something real to give up on her project. To keep her with us, we decided to start shooting earlier than we planned to. And in the end, she didn't cross the sea.

You teamed up with Frida Marzouk, a DOP who also worked with Abdellatif Kechiche (BLUE IS THE WARMEST COLOUR, 2013) and more recently, with Lina Soualem for her documentary BYE BYE TIBERIADE (2023). There were a lot of outdoor scenes in UNDER THE FIG TREES, but not so much in PROMISED SKY.

For this movie, we started to work together very early, and I brought her with me on the field. Long before shooting, we met the parish together, as I was invited to Sunday's masses. We both tried to wrap our minds around what the film could be, so that we could improvise on set without having to talk about it every time. Frida is a very intuitive person, and she's very good with lightning. She also bonded with the cast in an incredible way. Rather than giving her a list of movie references, I wanted her to be by my side, so that she could dive with me into the world I wanted to create, before even writing the script.

Your previous work was set in the countryside, but this movie takes place in a city. And yet, it's very hard to recognize Tunis.

I wanted to film the city from these women's perspective. Tunis is a blur for them. Apart from young people, who go out clubbing, those migrants don't have any access to the country they live in. This is something I witnessed, and I wanted to talk about it in the film. They don't have the opportunity to explore Tunisia. In a way, this blurred reality protects them, but this situation also impacted the shoot. Regarding the political situation of the country, we decided that we didn't want to endanger them by shooting outdoor scenes, because they could have been questioned by the police. Their precarious situation influenced us ; the precautions we had to take on set mirrored the precautions those migrants have to take everyday.

You wrote the script with Anna Ciennik and Malika Cécile Louati. What part did they play in the writing process ?

I've been working with Malika for a long time. We do a lot of research together. For a year, we went to the evangelical church every Sunday. We created this project together, and then Anna tagged along. I also asked Peggy Hamann, my co-writer for Under The Fig Trees, to help us, and she was with me throughout the whole process. To me, it was important to make sure that the script remained open. I need to have freedom, including on set.

How did you come up with the set ?

I hadn't imagined the church like this, but we had to shoot in the community's places so that the faithful wouldn't have to travel to places they never go, for safety's sake. We couldn't do sequence shots there but we had to deal with these logistical and security constraints by reducing the number of sets.

Nadia Ben Rachid, who usually works with Abderrahmane Sissako, was the editor for this film. Did you have a lot of material to work with ? Could the story have taken a different path ?

Yes, there were plenty of possibilities and many choices to make. For Nadia we had plenty of material, for me not enough. We had six weeks to shoot the movie, which isn't much for an ensemble film, when you're with the people you film everyday. Nadia edited my first short documentary, MY DAD'S FACEBOOK PAGE, and twelve years later, I wanted her to be by my side again, as a friend and as a film editor. She understands what's at stake in this movie, and she is very experienced. She knows what the story is about, I don't even have to explain it to her.

How did you come up with the title "PROMIS LE CIEL", which we can also hear in the song at the end of the movie ?

I was listening to this song on repeat when we started shooting, and the lyrics summed up the film in such a perfect way that I asked Delgres if I could use them for the title. "They promised me heaven, but meanwhile, I'm on earth, struggling".

I liked the fact that these lyrics are tragic but also quite energetic, just like the characters of the movie. These women are in a very precarious situation, and yet they make us stronger. The idea of a "promise" refers to the promise of human rights and solidarity, but also to all the things parents promise to their children, to the things governments promise to their citizens. It's also about the religious promise, the promise of what is waiting for us elsewhere, in the future.



BIOGRAPHY ERIGE SEHIRI

is a French-Tunisian director, producer, and former journalist whose work bridges documentary realism and narrative cinema. Sehiri began her film career in documentary, directing the acclaimed *RAILWAY MEN* (2018), which captured the daily struggles of Tunisian railway workers. In 2022, she wrote, directed, and produced her first feature, *UNDER THE FIG TREES*, an intimate portrait of youth, labor, and fleeting moments of connection set in a rural fig orchard. The film premiered at the 54th Directors' Fortnight at the Cannes Film Festival and was selected to represent Tunisia at the 2023 Academy Awards. It has since screened at major international festivals and been released theatrically in over twenty countries.

Beyond her work in film, Sehiri is an active advocate for freedom of expression and media literacy. She is the co-founder of the media *INKYFADA* and the Tunisian NGO *AI KHATT*. She is also a founding member of the *Rawiyat-Sisters in Film* collective, which supports women filmmakers across the Arab world and diaspora.

PROMISED SKY, her second feature film, will premiere at Cannes Film Festival Official selection *Un Certain Regard*.



AÏSSA MAÏGA

Aïssa Maïga is a French actress, director and writer. She was born in Senegal to a Malian father and a Senegalese mother. She studied in France, and quickly gained recognition for her eclectic performances. She played in Cédric Klapisch's *RUSSIAN DOLLS* and in Michael Haneke's *CODE UNKNOWN*. She was also nominated for the César Award for Best Female Revelation for her part in Abderrahmane Sissako's *BAMAKO*. Aïssa Maïga easily switches from one genre to another : her range goes from comedy (*THE AFRICAN DOCTOR*) to more dramatic films (Michel Gondry's *FROTH ON THE DAYDREAM*).

She began her international career with *THE BOY WHO HARNESSSED THE WIND* on Netflix, before joining the cast of two TV shows, *TAKEN DOWN* (RTÉ/Arte) and *THE FEAR INDEX* (Sky). In 2023, she also played Queen Nandi in the american TV show *KING SHAKA* (Showitme/CBS).

As a filmmaker, she directed two documentaries : *REGARD NOIR* (Canal+), a gripping film dissecting the portrayal of black people onscreen, and *WALK ON WATER*, a call for action warning us about climate change in the Sahel region. The film won a prize at the 2021 Panafrican Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO) and was selected in the Cannes Film Festival.



LAETITIA KY

Laetitia Ky is a Ivorian artist, actress and activist, who was born in Abidjan in 1996. She rose to fame through her hair sculptures : she uses her hair as a material for art and activism, and as a way to promote self-esteem, gender equality and black beauty.

Her work, which includes visual arts, performances and social activism, quickly gained international recognition. She made her film debut in Philippe Lacôte's NIGHT OF THE KINGS, and went on playing the character of Manuella/Udoka in Giacomo Abbruzzese's DISCO BOY. The film was showcased at the Berlin Film Festival.

In 2022, Laetitia Ky published her autobiography and artbook *Love and Justice*, in which she discusses her unique perspective on the human body and on social activism.



DEBORA LOBE NANEY

Debora Lobe Naney is Ivorian and 28 years old. PROMISED SKY marks her first steps in cinema.

CASTING

Marie : **Aïssa MAÏGA**

Jolie : **Laetitia KY**

Naney : **Debora Lobe NANEY**

Ismael : **Mohamed GRAYAA**

Foued : **Foued ZAAZAA**

Kenza : **Estelle Kenza DOGBO**

Noa : **Touré BLAMASSI**

Original title : **PROMIS LE CIEL**

International title : **PROMISED SKY**

Director : **Erige SEHIRI**

Screenwriters : **Erige SEHIRI, Anna CIENNIK, Malika Cécile LOUATI**

DOP : **Frida MARZOUK, AFC**

Editor : **Nadia BEN RACHID**

Music : **Valentin HADJADJ**

Sound : **Aymen Laabidi, Alexis Jung, Simon Apostolou**

Art director : **Amel Rezgui**

Costume Design : **Imen Khalledi**

Hair & make up : **Karine Ourega**

Line producer : **Julien Auer, Yasmine Dhoukar**

Postproduction supervisor : **Adrien Léongue**

Production : **Didar DOMEHRI (Maneki Films)
and Erige SEHIRI (Henia Production)**

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