



FILM MOVEMENT PLUS EXCLUSIVE RELEASE

PRESS CONTACT

Michael Krause | Foundry Communications
(212) 586-7967 | mkrause@foundrycomm.com

Official Selection

tiff

Toronto International
Film Festival 2018

THE MERCY OF THE JUNGLE

a film by
JOEL KAREKEZI

Belgium, France, Rwanda | 2018
French & Swahili with English Subtitles
War, Drama | 90 minutes | 2.39:1 | Stereo

SHORT SYNOPSIS

At the outbreak of the Second Congo War, Sergeant Xavier and young private Faustin are accidentally left behind in the jungle. With only each other to count on, they embark on an odyssey across the most violent forest on earth, facing the depths of their own war-torn souls.

LONG SYNOPSIS

At the outbreak of the Second Congo War, Rwandan soldiers Sergeant Xavier and Private Faustin are sent to hunt down Hutu rebels in the vast jungles of Eastern Congo. Xavier is a stoic veteran of the ethnic wars that have plagued his country for years. Faustin is an eager young recruit who joined the army to avenge the death of his father and brothers. Under the relentless command of Major Kayitare, they march eighty kilometers a day in pursuit of the murderers of nearly one million Tutsis during the Rwandan genocide four years ago.

One night, Xavier and Faustin are accidentally left behind when the battalion races out to chase fleeing rebels. They try to catch up, but must take refuge in the forest when local Congolese militiamen catch sight of them. Lost, with no hope of catching their men, they decide to press west through the jungle toward Kasai Province where Xavier believes the Major is headed next. It will not be easy. In the last war, Xavier saw hundreds die in the jungle without adequate supplies. Still, without their battalion they are as good as dead.

After a few desperate weeks of hunger, Faustin finds a way to catch food with skills he learned back on his farm. Xavier keeps them out of trouble with local patrols and mercenary mining operations, saving Faustin's life on more than one occasion. Along the way, they grow close. Xavier learns that Faustin has a wife and vows to get him home to her. Xavier had a wife once, but she died while he was away fighting the last war. He believes it was God's punishment for the things he did then, when he and the Major chased rebel families into this forest and condemned them to die of hunger and sickness. When Xavier falls into the feverish grip of malaria, he's tortured by visions of the dead. Unable to walk, Faustin carries him on his back until they finally emerge from the forest, four months after plunging into its depths.

A local village takes them in. Xavier recovers and learns that the Rwandan Army is camped on a mountain in the distance. He and Faustin set out to rejoin their troops,

even though both now question their place in the war. They reach the mountain, narrowly dodging the bullets of their own paranoid troops. Xavier and Faustin are separated and interrogated by a captain who believes them to be rebel spies. After several days, the Major hears of Xavier's return and comes to his aid. Faustin has been badly beaten and will die unless the Major sends him home to a hospital. Xavier begs him to help, but the Major refuses to waste fuel on one second-rate soldier. As Xavier grows insolent, the Major threatens to throw him back into the stockade to rot. Xavier insists the Major might as well shoot him if the private dies. Finally, the Major relents.

As troops load Faustin into a supply truck bound for Rwanda, Xavier bids him a tearful goodbye and tells him to return home and raise his son in peace. That night, during a vicious rebel assault, Xavier refuses to shoot an enemy child soldier and is killed. Sometime later, Faustin raises crops with his wife and son back in Rwanda. He is forever grateful for Xavier's sacrifice, happy to be free of the jungle and done with war.



DIRECTOR'S NOTE

I was born in 1985 in Rwanda, in Gisenyi, a town on the shores of Lake Kivu near the border. I am a Rwandan genocide survivor. When genocide started, I was eight. I saw many dead people on the streets. Lake Kivu turned red from the blood and the bodies of innocent people. I even saw children and babies lying on the banks, and familiar faces walking around town, armed with machetes, boasting about killing their friends, their neighbors.

Some days after the genocide started, my father was killed. He was a Tutsi. I had to run away and hide to survive. I was convinced that I was going to die and wondered what I had done to deserve such a fate. What would I do with my life if I miraculously survived? What would be the meaning of my existence?

With my sister, I managed to get to Goma, in Congo. I was only a child and I became a refugee. Soon after, new refugees arrived in Goma: the genocidists, fearing reprisals, fled Rwanda when it was taken over by the Tutsi army.

The situation became apocalyptic in Goma: the persecutors joined their victims in the overpopulated camps, the smell of death was lingering in town, flies invading every corner of every district... We were dying from cholera and other diseases.

At first I thought God wanted to punish the culprits, these new Hutu refugees who had perpetrated unspeakable atrocities. But soon enough I realized that none of these children, be they sons or daughters of yesterday's or today's persecutors, deserved the fate which had fallen upon them.

Back in Gisenyi, my native village, my sister and I found our aunt. Like us, she had fled the massacre. She had found a safe place in the forests of Kivu. What a relief to see a mother figure again. My sister and I had survived the camps and their miserable life conditions but it was nothing compared to what my aunt had to endure. She told us what happened during her exile, how many refugees died in the Congolese jungle. She described what the survivors had to do to get food and water, how some people were

ready to pay a hundred dollars for a small sip of water. Sometimes, out of desperation, someone would drink gasoline and die. My aunt told me she was feeding on roots cooked in her own urine. She was an especially strong woman to have been able to survive this.

Ever since the events my family and my people endured, I have been tormented by questions related to genocide and war. As a survivor, I decided to become an advocate for peace. I want to tell my story, and pass on the ones that I have been told. I want to report the true face of war, and reveal the mechanisms that feed the conflicts.

That's why I turned to cinema. I took lessons of filmmaking on the Internet. I learned the basics of writing and threw myself into the production of my first feature film: ***Imbabazi: The Pardon***. This self-produced film takes place during the genocide and forced me to dive back into these events, but considering the big picture, and ask myself what future the next generations will have with such history.

The Mercy of the Jungle is the result of these reflections. This is an anti-war story based on an event that my cousin actually lived through. During the Second Congo War in 1998, he got lost in the jungle with a friend. They spent six months there and struggled to survive until they found their army. I was deeply moved by his story, by its tragic and simultaneously absurd sides, by the courage they showed when facing the dangers. This episode, as traumatic as it may be, gave them the opportunity to think, to analyze and sometimes to understand what had really led them into the jungle. Of course, political, economic and historical realities are the causes of armed conflicts. But deep inside the darkness, there are men, who are more or less conscious of the forces that led them to act, suffer, and perpetrate the worst possible atrocities.

The Mercy of the Jungle tells the story of two soldiers, Xavier and Faustin. One of them has lived the Rwandese genocide and the two wars of Congo which followed. He is a veteran, a war hero, respected by all. The other is a young and naive private who knows nothing about war and just joined the army. He wants to avenge his father and brothers who were killed during the genocide... The two characters find themselves trapped deep into the Congolese forest, one of the deadliest in the world. They wander,

alone and constantly alert, without food or water. They must find a way to survive in these conditions while war is raging everywhere around them. A ridiculous war in which enemies and allies look alike, in which yesterday's ally becomes today's enemy, a war that drags everyone, without distinction of age, sex or origin, into its murderous madness. The two men wander like two abandoned ghosts; they must overcome their past and find a way to conceive a future.

It is often said that war reveals the human soul. This question is at the very center of the film.

I consider it my duty, as a young African filmmaker, to adapt this story to the screen. In memory of all the victims of the wars which destroy our lives and jeopardize our future on the continent. Even if the film takes place in Rwanda, this is in no way a film about this genocide or this war in particular. War is everywhere in the world at this very moment and my goal is universal. Through cinema, I wish to pay tribute to the victims but also question our past to finally begin to conceive a better future.



DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Joel Karekezi graduated in 2008 in film directing from Cinecours. In 2009 he directed his short film *The Pardon* by the support of Maisha Film Lab. The film won the Golden Impala Award at the Amakula Film Festival in Uganda and the Award for Best Short Film at the Silicon Valley African Film Festival in 2010. He received a development award from the Göteborg International Film Festival Fund for his first feature film *Imbabazi: The Pardon*, which screened in various festivals around the world, and won the NILE GRAND PRIZE 2014 at Luxor African Film Festival & Best Director at International Images Film Festival for Woman 2014. In 2012 his script *The Mercy of the Jungle* won the CFI Award for the Most Promising Audiovisual Project at Durban Filmart and the STEP development award at Luxor African Film Festival 2015. It was selected at Cannes - La Fabrique des cinemas du monde in 2013, Locarno Open Doors in 2014, Atelier Grand Nord in Quebec in 2015, Production Forum in Namur in 2015 et Rencontres de Coproduction Francophone in Paris in 2015.

FILMOGRAPHY

WRITER AND DIRECTOR

The Pardon [short film], 2009

Imbabazi: The Pardon [feature film], 2013,

Portrait of Reconciliation [feature documentary], 2016

PRODUCER

Black Belgian [feature film], 2017, directed by Jean Luc Habyarimana

Ishaba [feature film in development], directed by Yves Amuli

Aphelion Sight [feature film in development], 2017, directed by Jimmy Gasana

CAST & CREW

Marc Zinga (Xavier)	Ronald Ssemaganda (Child 1)
Stéphane Bak (Faustin)	Mathew Nabwiso (Paul)
Ibrahim Ahmed "Pino" (Mukundzi)	Were Edrine (Child 2)
Nirere Shanel (Amina)	Cedrick Mbongo Mbulu (Prisoner)
Abby Mukiibi (Major)	Henry Nsekero Mazinga (Prisoner)
Michael Wawuyo (Village Chief)	Samuel Tebandeke (Soldier 1)
Joel Prynca Atiku Okuyo (Kibindankoyi)	Isaac Kabula (Soldier 2)
Kantarama Gahigiri (Kazungu)	Nicholas Akampurira (Faustin's son)
River Dan Rugaju (Captain)	Michael Wawuyo Jr (Refugee)

Written by Joel Karekezi, Casey Schroen, Aurélien Bodinaux

Directed by Joel Karekezi

Producer: Aurélien Bodinaux (Neon Rouge Production)

Coproducer: Oualid Baha (Tact Production)

Associate Producers: Casey Schroen, Alex Moussa Sawadogo, Joel Karekezi

Director of Photography: Joachim Philippe

Production Designer: Geneviève Leyh

Makeup & Hair: Shakira Kibirige

Editor: Antoine Donnet

Sound Designer: Benoît de Clerck

Sound Mixer: Philippe Grivel

Music Composer: Line Adam

Songwriter: Nirere Shanel

Line Producer: Oualid Baha

Production Manager (Uganda): Michael Wawuyo

1st AD: Kantarama Gahigiri

Color grader: Tom Mulder

Casting Director: Kadija Leclere

Shot on location in Uganda

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