

# the Invitation









A RED LION PRODUCTION  
IN ASSOCIATION WITH JOLI RIDEAU MEDIA

# the Invitation

A FILM BY FABRIZIO MALTESE

WRITTEN BY  
STEPHAN ROELANTS & FABRIZIO MALTESE

BASED ON AN ORIGINAL IDEA BY  
POL CRUCHTEN & ABDERRAHMANE SISSAKO



THESSALONIKI  
DOCUMENTARY  
FESTIVAL  
FILM FORWARD  
COMPETITION 2022

RUNNING TIME: 79'  
LANGUAGES: FRENCH, ARABIC, HASSANYA, ARAMAIC  
ASPECT RATIO: 2,35:1  
PROJECTION FORMAT: DCP, COLOR, ZI  
PRODUCTION COUNTRY: LUXEMBOURG  
RELEASE: THESSALONIKI DOCUMENTARY FESTIVAL (MARCH 16, 2022)  
OFFICIAL SELECTION - FILM FORWARD COMPETITION

**JANUARY 31th 2024 in Luxembourg**

# Logline

An invitation from Timbuktu director Abderrahmane Sissako to visit and film his homeland, Mauritania, results in an epic yet ultimately intimate journey that retraces the threads of a relationship interrupted all too soon.

*"I accepted the invitation. Faced with absence, I might have lost my way. But my encounters drew a path."*





# Synopsis

The desert is calling. Yet, it is with the ocean that Fabrizio Maltese's journey begins. He has accepted Abderrahmane Sissako's invitation to set out on a Voyage and continue the film he and Pol Cruchten had initiated together.

Pol has since passed away. The project he had been dreaming of has thus taken on a new, symbolic dimension. It must see the light of day. This is why Fabrizio has travelled on his own to meet with the Mauritanian director. But fate seems to have decided otherwise.

From Saint Louis in Senegal to Nouakchott in Mauritania, from Mata Moulana to Chinguetti, Fabrizio allows himself to get lost alone in the desert, with nothing more than a few scribbled notes jotted down on the piece of paper that was given to him by the two filmmakers.

Through windswept dunes and shaded palm groves, in the shelter of a mud hut or above wetland water lilies, we come to understand that the journey's guide is not the one we expected. It is alongside Pol's spirit that we now walk the rocky road.

Leathery skins and sandy parchments, surprise encounters and missed appointments, the vastness of the desert becomes a mirror in which to discover our unexpected quests and look deeper into ourselves. And Fabrizio's film, a way to unite the souls of his two travelling companions yet again.







# A conversation with Fabrizio Maltese

## Can you tell us how the film was born?

It was a project initiated by the director Pol Cruchten who was a pioneer in the film industry in Luxembourg. I had a lot of respect for him. He contacted me rather unexpectedly to give me the DOP position. He had presented the film to me like a kind of dream: 'Abderrahmane Sissako has invited me to drink tea in Mauritania, and I'd like you to come with me.' Of course, I said yes right away. We saw each other regularly during three months and then I learnt the shocking news of his passing and felt devastated. Then there was a sort of mobilisation from the initiators of the film, producers and financiers, who all shared the will to bring the project to life despite everything. And I was asked to direct it.

## Did you keep on working in the same way Pol Cruchten had, or did you move away from it?

The film takes its origin in the story of a friendship, that of Pol and Abderrahmane Sissako who met in 2019 in Saint Louis, Senegal, while attending a festival. According to all the testimonies I've gathered, something magical apparently happened at that moment. The world around them had disappeared. It was really intense. Abderrahmane's wife told me

herself that 'they looked like lovers' (*laughs*).

In making this film, it was obviously impossible for me to have the same approach as Pol. The concept he had initiated was to leave without a script and let Abderrahmane and the unexpected guide us. He wanted to experience a situation of discomfort. The specific idea of discomfort in the process of film-making, that I kept. But with Pol's passing, what the film was about got reversed: Pol and Abderrahmane became the subjects of the film. I went on location scouting, went to see the places where they had met, like the boat Bou El Mogdad where they had started talking about the film. This was now where the film was to start, before evolving into an introspective journey.

**There is a *mise en abyme* in *The Invitation*. The audience is invited to take part in the creative process. Your voice-over is actually guiding the narration. Allowing the audience to explore the film's behind-the-scenes, was it a storytelling process you were familiar with?**

Not particularly. But for this film, it came about quite spontaneously. I even thought of going even further and showing the actual film crew on screen. We also had the idea of a subjective camera that could stand for Pol's eye. We shot with two cameras. For the most part, I used a small steadycam that allows very fluid movements. Sometimes I had the impression that these movements were initiated by the camera itself, that it was becoming independent. During the editing, we then had to find a certain balance and master this concept. However, we kept the idea of a subjective camera at certain times, for example during the visit to Abderrahmane's house, at the start of the film.

## *The Invitation* assumes a spiritual dimension.

Yes, it's an introspective and spiritual journey. In a way, geography doesn't matter much. We shot in Mauritania, but it could've been elsewhere. The fact of the matter is that this country resisted us; the shooting conditions were very harsh. It nurtured the film. I had to be in a situation of discomfort so as to live a retreat resembling that of hermits, away from any urban context and worldliness.

## Had you determined an itinerary? Was the trip across the country prepared or completely improvised?

Only the beginning of the trip was organised. Abderrahmane Sissako understood that I was looking to experience a situation of discomfort, and he adapted to this need by guiding me without really helping me. It was intentional on his part. The journey couldn't be simple or linear, it had to be marked with cracks and uncertainties. It was necessary for me to get lost. That's what happened, and that's what helped me to come up with *The Invitation's* dramaturgy. At a certain point, the film broke away from Pol. It became my own adventure through the desert.







## **How difficult was it to shoot in Mauritania?**

First of all, there's the scorching heat, and the difficulty to protect yourself from it. Even though we went there at the time of year where the climate is supposed to be the most favourable for uninitiated people like us! And it's an extremely vast country. Their unit of measure is actually very different to the one we have in Europe. When they speak of a 'nearby village', it can mean an 8 to 12hr drive to reach it. We spent a lot of time travelling, and most of the time we were very far from any form of civilisation. However, there were police stations everywhere. When I shot the film, two thirds of the country was still threatened by possible jihadist incursions. Especially on the side of Mali. But we didn't suffer from it: Abderrahmane Sissako had ensured us with appropriate safety, and we were sometimes supported by the physical presence of Luxembourg ambassador in Dakar, Nicole Bintner.

## ***The Invitation* also addresses the questions of multiculturalism and creates bridges between civilisations.**

The film was born of human encounters. Pol's, Abderrahmane's and my origins are different, the way we approach and think of cinema and creation is different, yet there are spiritual links between all cultures, at least the ones that come from monotheistic religions. There's a common basis. I received a Catholic education, but I might have experienced the most wonderful exchanges with Muslims or Jews. A Mauritanian and I might eat and dress differently, but we are first and foremost human beings. It is important to listen to each other, and that should be

enough to understand each other.

I did not arrive in Mauritania with the same approach as Pol. He was devoid of knowledge about Africa and Abderrahmane Sissako had promised to guide him throughout his country. During my journey, I met another Abderrahmane, actually a friend of Sissako, in whom I recognised a kind of spiritual brother. This meeting helped me to understand the state of grace and the magic that had happened between Pol and Abderrahmane Sissako. It's an unexpected mirroring situation, all the more delightful since the two men share the same first name!

## **You combine the roles of director and DOP. Can you tell us more about your work method?**

My background is in photography, mainly portrait. The opportunity to make films came to me through documentary. I progressively got to find the way of shooting that suited me best, while working on the films I was involved in. Unlike film, photography is a solitary practice. Holding the camera is an integral part of the filmmaking and writing process to me. I need to feel the scene's importance by framing it myself. I prefer to avoid having intermediaries, in order to best capture spontaneous impulses, moments and movements.

## **Did the Covid-19 Pandemic have an impact on the film's production?**

We finished shooting the film in February 2020, just before the pandemic hit Europe with full force. I came back at the time of the Berlinale. In Berlin, a taxi driver refused to take me because I was Italian and could have brought the epidemic from Italy with

me! I met my editor, Qutaiba Barhamji, during the festival. After that, due to personal reasons, I was stuck in Italy for three months, my family and I victims of the virus. When the borders reopened after the first confinement, I was finally able to return to Luxembourg where I live. We started logging from a distance, because Qutaiba was in Paris. But the distance was a problem, we really needed to work together. We discussed it with the production, and Qutaiba finally came to join me in Luxembourg. This also made it possible to include the film's other screenwriter, Stephan Roelants, in the daily creative process. Stephan's contribution was essential for the film to find its balance. The editing was a really intensive period. It lasted a total of twenty weeks. Qutaiba Barhamji is a very meticulous editor, who makes you realise that an extra or missing fraction of a second can have great consequences. I really liked the work method we had together, which was intensified by the fact that the pandemic was outside our editing room. The world around had stopped: we were editing in my house, sharing all meals and conversing continuously. There was nothing but the film.



**This is not the first time that the themes of travel and the desert have appeared in your filmography.**

I have always been driven by the idea of travel. I do not understand people who travel with the desire to keep on leading their everyday lives elsewhere, without letting the trip shake up their habits and preconceived ideas. Traveling is an experience! It must allow us to gain new perspectives, it must be lived with wide open eyes. We had a deep conversation on this matter with Abderrahmane Sissako during which we compared the experiences we had in our youth, when we both decided to separate from our homeland.

As for the desert, it's quite the opposite setting to the one I grew up in – Italy, in abundant nature. In the Bible and various mythologies, the desert is where characters go to reflect. After being confronted with nothingness, we are led to interpret the appearance of a stream or a rock as a prophetic vision! The desert's hostility calls for introspection. It is an environment that allows you to focus again on what's essential, and cease to be a scattered.

*Interview by V.Q.*









# Fabrizio Maltese

## Director

Fabrizio Maltese is a renowned Italian photographer and documentary filmmaker, who is based in Paris and Luxembourg.

His celebrity portraits have graced the covers of magazines all around the globe, including *The Hollywood Reporter*, *GQ* and *Rolling Stones*. He is the only photographer to have won the *Venice Movie Stars Photography Award* twice and was nominated for the prestigious *National Arts & Entertainment Journalism Award*. As a stills photographer, he has worked on some twenty European arthouse films.

Maltese has directed multiple feature-length documentaries: *Twenty-Five Palms* (2015), *Fifty Days in the Desert* (2016), *California Dreaming* (2019) and most recently his autobiographical narrative *I Fiori Persi* (2021). His films have been shown at a number of international festivals with *The Invitation* being no exception, premiering at the *Thessaloniki Documentary Festival*.

His work has been showcased in several solo exhibitions around the globe and Macau's *Cinematheque* has dedicated him a retrospective exhibition that displays both his photography and documentary work.







# The Desert, for me

The desert is a key presence in all my five features, either a real or a metaphorical version of it. Is a common thread that can be useful to interpret my work.

In *50 Days in the Desert*, the title evokes the period Jesus spent alone in the desert to find the true self and resist temptations. The desert is therefore the perfect setting for a filmmaker to find his way, to tell his story, and play with their characters in a maelstrom of emotions and conflicts.

*California Dreaming* was set in the Mojave desert and the harsh environment defies and challenges the strength and motivation of the people portrayed there, like in an epic Western movie, while trying to achieve their own version of the American Dream.

In *Lost Flowers*, the desert is both metaphorical and real as it is set, unexpectedly, at the very heart of our cities during the pandemic, desertifying spaces and people at their own core.





With *The Invitation* the desert becomes a claustrophobic space in its vastness, forcing the traveler to look into the self to find the strength to go on. The infinite space turns into a huilt clos that redefines the notions of emptiness, absence and isolation and illustrates how these emotions are part of our personal quests to understand who we are.

In *The Invitation* the desert offers the ideal setting for such explorations as it is a symbol of all of the above. It puts us in front of a vast nothingness, which forces us to look deeper into ourselves.

*The Invitation* is a journey of discovery in every possible way. Like the filmmaker who, left to fulfill his own device, allowed himself to get lost in the desert being guided only by chance, the viewer is invited too, in an almost interactive manner, to follow their own inner path of discovery.









# Stephan Roelants

## Co-Writer

Belgian-born and Luxembourg-based, Stephan Roelants is a four-time Academy Award nominated producer for 'Best Animated Feature Film' (*Wolfwalkers*, *The Breadwinner*, *Song of the Sea*, *Ernest and Celestine*), and founder and CEO of *Melusine Productions* and Studio 352. Member of the *Producers Guild of America*, he has been nominated as 'Outstanding Producer of the Year' (2021) for his animated feature *Wolfwalkers*. Roelants has produced dozens of animation, documentary and fiction features and short films, as well as TV series and has further been very successful as a screenwriter for several fiction and non-fiction feature films. In addition, he has also published six fiction novels and a number of short stories.

*L'Invitation* is his third collaboration with Fabrizio Maltese after co-producing *California Dreaming* (2019) and *I Fiori persi (Lost Flowers)* (2021) as a co-writer and co-producer.











# Qutaiba Barhamji

## Editor

Born in Damascus, Qutaiba Barhamji is an award-winning film director and editor currently based in France.

He has edited over 50 films in 15 different languages, including both feature documentaries and fiction films. His works have been shown around the world at festivals including Venice, Berlin, IDFA, Rotterdam, Paris, Nyon, and many others. Among them feature the *Venice Film Festival* multi-award-winning documentary film *Still Recording* (2018, directed by Ghiath Ayoub and Saeed Al Batal) and the feature film *Poisonous Roses* (2018, directed by Ahmed Fawzi), which represented Egypt at the Oscars in 2020.

Qutaiba also works as an editing consultant and trainer for several organizations and universities in Europe and the Middle East. As a juror, he has participated in numerous festivals and funds, including *Sundance Documentary Fund*, *Docudays UA*, and *Minsk International Film Festival 'Listapad'*.

*L'Invitation* is his second collaboration with Fabrizio Maltese after *I Fiori persi (Lost Flowers)* (2021).





# Abderrahmane Sissako

Abderrahmane Sissako was born in Kiffa, Mauritania, in 1961 and raised in Mali, his father's homeland. When he returned to Mauritania in 1980, the emotional and financial difficulties of adjustment made him turn to literature and film. A study grant allowed him to attend the Institute of the University of Moscow. *Le Jeu* (1989), first presented as a graduation assignment, won the prize for best short at the Giornate del Cinema Africano of Perugia in 1991. In 1993, *October* was shown at Locarno and *Un Certain Regard* and won prizes the world over. His film *Waiting for Happiness* was screened at Cannes 2002 and was winner of the FIPRESCI award for best film in the *Un Certain Regard* section. It was also shown at the New York Film Festival in 2002 and won the Grand Prize at FESPACO in 2003. The overtly political *Bamako* (2006) looked at the legacy of colonialism and the lopsided relationship between the first and third worlds. His 2014 film *Timbuktu* was selected to compete for the Palme d'Or in the main competition section at the 2014 Cannes Film Festival, garnered a 2015 Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Language Film, and swept the 2015 César Awards in France winning seven awards, including Best Director and Best Film.

# Pol Cruchten

Pol Cruchten born in 1963, was a Luxembourgish film producer, director and screenwriter. He studied film in Paris and after his return to Luxembourg, he launched his career with *Hochzäitsnuecht* (1992), which is, to date, the only Luxembourgish film shown as part of the 'Un certain regard' category at the *Cannes Film Festival*. Aside from his fictional works, he had an eye for documentary filmmaking, which becomes apparent in *Never Die Young* (2013) and *Voices from Chernobyl* (2016). Both documentaries received the *Lëtzebuurger Filmpräis*. Pol Cruchten passed away in July 2019 during the early stages of the documentary production.







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SCREENPLAY BY STEPHAN ROELANTS &  
FABRIZIO MALTESE

BASED ON AN IDEA BY POL CRUCHTEN &  
ABDERRAHMANE SISSAKO

EDITOR QUTAIBA BARHAMJI

FEATURING ABDERRAHMANE LAHY  
SALEM DENDOU  
ABDERRAHMANE MANE  
MOHAMED LEMINE RAJEL  
MAKA DENDENNI  
MOUNAYA SIYID  
HADRAMI MEIDAH  
TFEILA  
MARIEM AZIZA  
MOHAMED EL MICHRY

WITH THE VOICES OF NICOLE BINTNER  
ABDERRAHMANE SISSAKO  
METTOU LAHY

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY FABRIZIO MALTESE

PRODUCER JEANNE GEIBEN

CO-PRODUCER FABRIZIO MALTESE

LINE PRODUCER VINCENT QUÉNAULT

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