An interview with Giacomo Abbruzzese, director of anti-war *Disco Boy*: “The stranger’s gaze sees things we no longer see or perhaps have never seen”

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Disco Boy, the first feature film from Italian writer and director Giacomo Abbruzzese (born 1983), premiered at the 2023 Berlin International Film Festival. At that event, the film garnered a Silver Bear award for Outstanding Artistic Contribution in the category of cinematography (Hélène Louvart) and has received nominations at the César Awards, International Cinephile Society and Lumières Award, where it won for Best Music. The WSWS published a full review last year. The movie opened in theaters in several US and Canadian cities this month.

The film tells the stories of two young men, Alex/Aleksei (Franz Rogowski), a Belarusian who joins the French Foreign Legion in hope of eventually gaining French citizenship, and Jomo (Morr Ndiaye), who is battling the huge oil companies in Nigeria as a member of MEND (Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta). The giant firms, in league with the thoroughly corrupt Nigerian government, are ravaging the region and brutally exploiting its inhabitants.

As the WSWS explained: “After executives of an oil company are taken hostage, the fates of Aleksei and Jomo become intertwined. During a mission by the French Foreign Legion, the two are pitted against each other.” Tragic and telling events ensue.

We described the work as “a remarkable anti-war film.” It offers, the WSWS wrote, “an appeal for international unification and against nationalism. War serves only to further the interests of the super-rich minority in corporations and financial markets, like the international oil industry in the film.”

Disco Boy also defies the banality of Hollywood narratives and depictions, returning to the cinema the humanity and richness that belong in the arts and that audiences deserve.

The WSWS interviewed Abbruzzese recently during his North America tour.

Marc Wells: What inspired you to make this movie?

Giacomo Abbruzzese: It was the need to make an atypical war movie. Even in the war movies I love, the “Other” never exists, whether the enemy or the victim. One may perceive it for an instant, but you never have that “Otherness.” Typically, you have only one perspective.

We’ve been accustomed to this single view to make us feel we’re on the right side of the conflict. But this is also why conflicts never end, in the sense that it is indispensable to be able to look at the world also from the other side, with eyes that uphold different values and history. You make peace with the enemies, not with your friends. This was my basic conception.

There was also a practical cause: one night I was at a club, *Divinae Follie* in Bisceglie [in Italy’s Apulia region], and I met a dancer who had been a soldier. This double vocation and definition was very interesting to me, especially how a person could contain such disparate and apparently distant components. At the same time, there were some interesting affinities: the body of the dancer and the body of the soldier both have senses of discipline, even choreography, a strange need to get to the end of the day feeling exhausted. On such a basis, I came up with the character of Alex, as well as Jomo.

MW: What made you choose such diverse worlds? A migrant from Belarus and a fighter from the Niger Delta?

GA: This movie has a long history. Ten years ago, I went to Kiev for a screening of my short film *Fireworks*, a movie about international eco-terrorists who blast the heavily polluting ILVA steel mill in Taranto, Italy on December 31 in the middle of the New Year’s Eve fireworks.

A group of dissidents from Belarus invited me to screen the movie at an underground festival in Minsk. I accepted and it turned out to be an incredible experience. There I met many interesting people, I learned of many leaving for the French Foreign Legion to get EU [European Union] papers and never coming back. What struck me is that these were not stereotypical “soldiers,” they were people like me who read books, watch movies. But their Belarusian passport limited their aspirations.

There was also an element of adventure that still exists in Eastern Europe, pretty absent in Western Europe nowadays. So, about twelve years ago is when I started developing Alex, the Belarusian character. Then I started reading up on the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta [MEND]. I was attracted to it because it was an ecological vanguard coming from the Niger Delta in Africa, one of the most polluted locations on earth.

I was also attracted by their self-awareness in their look, their

communication. They have an almost performative character to their operations. So, this was the original triangle from which *Disco Boy* was born.

MW: The movie explores the issue of migration: from Belarus to France in search of a better life. How did the theme of immigration operate in the development of your script?

GA: I've always been interested in the "foreigner," in his most ample and abstract dimension: the stranger's gaze sees things we no longer see or perhaps have never seen. I like the foreigner as a possibility to see more and better, especially through listening to him. Clearly, this is also a highly political and central issue, like climate change: how are these issues being tackled?

What has always fascinated me is the question of universality: in struggle, in the human condition. What I could never stand is the tendency to relativize life and death, limiting it to the people closest to us culturally, geographically, nationally. As if other lives were worth less. Color, religion, geopolitical convenience, sensitivity to a certain type of suffering, or certain deaths instead of others: deaths of convenience, while the "others" count only as mere numerical terms.

In my short *Fireworks*, I developed this theme in the way of an international revolutionary brigade, if you will, à la the Spanish Revolution and the issue of international solidarity was central. Politics must be as international as possible. In this sense, the internationalism of socialism worked, as it reduced the question of colonialism, creating more equality among nations.

MW: Your depiction of MEND contained a more humanized approach to a rebel group, quite different from the traditional narrative that seeks to demonize "the bad guy."

GA: Generally, the image we are given of groups that choose the armed struggle is often one of face-covered people. But behind that balaclava there's always a complexity, a story which the media don't care to probe further. The definition of "terrorist" is used conveniently by all governments quite freely, it may mean everything and nothing. For groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, I'm far from their ideas. However, there is a difference between an armed struggle in Palestine, where there is an occupation, or in Italy, where there is no occupation and a different history. From our comfortable position it's easy to say no to armed struggle.

But in a context where survival, existence, dignity and military occupation are concrete issues it's different. I cannot condemn the Palestinian people choosing the armed struggle, how could I? I don't know whether that struggle will lead to real emancipation. The history of at least the last 50 years didn't go well in that direction, as Palestinians know. It is desperation that leads to embracing violence. It makes me laugh that we are told "it all started on October 7." That situation was determined well in advance. Those who create a situation of constant tension, non-resolution of the conflict also build colonies, implement embargoes and seek to find a cover in the status quo.

Then there is the enormous hypocrisy and myopia of the international community that "should" intervene directly. I see [EU foreign policy chief Josep] Borrell's interviews where some things are said, but then you have twelve Israeli ministers who meet to discuss settlements in Gaza and, aside from generic criticism, there is never any consequence, or real sanctions. This is how the international community has lost any credibility. Only those in bad faith can defend the current situation.

MW: Your depiction of Alex's struggle with Jomo and eventually Jomo's death are dealt with extraordinary sensitivity. Alex clearly goes through a deep trauma. What allowed you to present these elements so empathically?

GA: I was influenced by important books such as [Joseph Conrad's] *The Heart of Darkness*, [Louis-Ferdinand Céline's] *Journey to the End of the Night* and [Swiss-born Blaise Cendrars'] *J'ai tué*. This last writer was himself in the French Foreign Legion where he lost his right hand and learned to write with his left. In *J'ai tué* he describes the total abyss of killing a person you know nothing about. This inspired the struggle between Alex and Jomo. Also, I decided to shoot this scene in the same location where Mikhail [a friend of Alex's] disappeared in the water. I wanted to create the feeling that this is always the same water, the same leaves, the same mud. No escape. But because Alex was not able to bury his comrade, he will have mercy for Jomo's body and will bury it.

So, when the ghost of Jomo comes back, it's not for haunting Alex, but to give him a gift. The most precious thing he had, the dance he shares with Jomo's sister Udoka.

MW: The struggle scene was very unique: it deliberately avoided graphic images that often characterize films and chooses to use a thermal camera. What was behind this choice?

GA: It is precisely because of the pornographic use of violence in war images, both on television and cinema, that I felt the need to make a different choice. I could not totally avoid violence. After all, in a war movie you have combat scenes. But I decided to limit the violence to sound and use images that would take us elsewhere and depict a sort of emotional and social reciprocity between the two characters. The struggle was, in a way, already an initial form of the dance later developed between Udoka and Alex.