

Film Africa 2020 Baobab Award for Best Short Film

Jury Statement

The shortlist of films for this year's Baobab Award paint a multi-faceted tableau of contemporary African cinema that is promising and refreshing in such times as these. The films all display a theme of love, shape-shifting and manifesting as affection, patriotism, obsession, lust and perhaps, one dare say, addiction.

Also noteworthy is the use of indigenous African languages in most of the shorts and the growing presence of cues, tropes, nuances and references that are autochthonous to the films' origins: this development of intricately vernacular visuals and narratives asserts and advances the existence of an Africa with wholesome, developed histories and cultures, despite predominant Western notions of humanity or civilization.

Embracing a rich diversity of media, the ten shorts deal with weighty issues and offer cultural, socio-political commentary in ways that are subtle yet strong.

One winner alone is possible though.

Of this selection, Morad Mostafa's HENET WARD (Egypt, fiction, 2020) stands out for its delicate portrayal of continent-based race issues framed in the context of a hen(na) party, and seen through the eyes of a child whose mother is a foreigner. In the film, young Ward accompanies her mother and henna artist Halima to the pre-wedding ceremony where both receive a cheery welcome from their Egyptian hosts.

Through Mostafa's steady guidance of the viewer's gaze, we – along with Ward - witness age-old marriage customs, racism, and harassment from the film's singular, male character – a meddlesome, racist brute with an inflated sense of his masculinity.

While ensuing interactions between all parties appear to remain non-violent, HENET WARD's guided build-up of suspense and occasional waves of tension are however not misplaced, making the film's striking conclusion as effective as it is unexpected.

Suitable for all audiences, HENET WARD is ambitious without being ambiguous. It is a journey that has one forget that it is a film as we are fully immersed in it till the end.