

GLORIA FILMS PRESENTS



NEITHER HOLLYWOOD

NOR BOLLYWOOD

# NOTHINGWOOD

A FILM BY SONIA KRONLUND



QUINZAINÉ  
DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT  
CANNES 2017

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# NOTHINGWOOD

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## SYNOPSIS

About a hundred kilometers away from Kabul, Salim Shaheen, the most popular and prolific actor-director-producer in Afghanistan, comes to show some of his 110 films and to shoot the 111th in the process.

He has brought with him his regular troupe of actors, each more eccentric and out of control than the next. That trip is an opportunity for us to get to know Shaheen, a real movie buff who has been making Z movies tirelessly for more than thirty years in a country at war.

*Nothingwood* is the story of a man who spends his life making his childhood dreams come true.







## INTERVIEW WITH SONIA KRONLUND

*Nothingwood* revolves around Afghan director Salim Shaheen. How did you come up with the idea of making a film about this amazing character?

Atiq Rahimi first told me about Salim Shaheen almost ten years ago. Shaheen is very well known in Afghanistan. He is a kind of Afghan “Ed Wood”, who has directed more than a hundred films, most of the times in only four days! He is also an actor and a producer, and as a director

he casts members of his own family and plenty of people who aren’t professional actors. Some even pay to appear in his films!

He is an incredible tall-tale teller and there is a childlike quality about him, that long-lasting dream to make films with his pals. His crew and him are like kids in a schoolyard, pretending to be “in the movies”. The magic of cinema distracts them from their bleak circumstances. Shaheen is a quite complex man, but his childlike demeanor seemed universal to me.

At first, I was drawn by that childlikeness, that ingenuity about him, but then I discovered many other surprising traits.

Shaheen has a strong relationship with cinema, but it has nothing to do with Western cinephilia...

Shaheen loves Bollywood films above all else: the songs, the marriage plots and the fights. The man he admires the most is Rambo (he doesn't say Sylvester Stallone)! He also watches Kung fu and Z movies. His work is a combination of these influences: war movies with endless battles, kitsch and gory special effects, singing girls and sitcom dialogues! Cinema is his only culture. Shaheen cannot read or write, he just pretends. Everybody knows it but he would just never admit it.

No matter whether he is a good filmmaker or not, what you chose to film is first and foremost the vitality of his artistic impulse...

I love how Shaheen makes films all the time, as if it were a vital necessity, with tremendous energy and an unshakeable faith in what he does. Beyond the quality of his films, the Afghan people enjoy his work because it gives them a face and a voice that they won't find anywhere else. He represents them. In Shaheen's films, common people are heroes. The poor beat the rich. The weak prevail. The powerful get punished. His stories are about the problems of common people, and his characters may be muleteers, peasants or merchants. Shaheen also has policemen or soldiers play their own roles, and they are proud to appear onscreen. His films provide an image and an existence to people who lack both. This is what I find so touching about him.

In *Nothingwood*, you decided to follow him as he was shooting a new film...

I wanted this film to be more like a journey than a portrait, to be a small adventure that the viewers get to live with the characters, side by side, and not above them. Basically, the story lasts for five or six days, as Shaheen takes his troupe away from Kabul for a shooting.

I also chose this setup for another reason: when Shaheen is sitting in his chair in front of you, he controls everything, he talks a lot and has a peculiar way to transform reality to his own benefit. He also spends quite some time telling you how people love him and how great a director he is. A kind of surprising game sets in: everybody knows that he is overdoing it, that he is showing off, but there seems to be a tacit agreement, people find it funny and let him talk, they even love him for it. They love him because he is like them, he is their equal. However, when he is working, moving, as soon as he starts shooting, he changes completely. He is transcended by the joy, the pleasure and the amazing excitement he feels at shooting his film. This is also why I chose to film a trip, which is a much more suitable type of setting to capture the full scope of the character.

Shaheen reminds me of a friend of mine who often says: "I'm a really superficial person, but I cover a wide superficies!". Shaheen's depth is in his actions, in what he does.

When interacting with Shaheen, you admit that you are putting on an act: you are playing the part of the coward...

In order for Shaheen to stop controlling everything, I realised that I needed to play along, to become a character as well, and to slightly stage our relationship. I chose a character that wouldn't take center stage. But it wasn't always faked, I was often scared for real! Shaheen and his crew would make fun of me all the time. Afghans are often fatalistic. They think that everything is already written, determined beforehand by providence. *Insha'Allah* ! God willing. So the idea of being careful, of taking precautions may seem absurd to them. Besides, Shaheen is a really brave, valorous man, and it is very important



for him not to be scared. Even though there are terrorist attacks, Shaheen feels stronger than death. It is even the title of one of his films: *Stronger than Death*.

Shaheen shows a merrier side of Afghanistan, but in the middle of the film, the reality of war and terrorist attacks resurfaces, and you show it. Yes, we shot the film in the most stable area in Afghanistan, in Bamiyan. We had some fun, we laughed and ate all the time... At some point, we needed to reintroduce elements of reality, to give greater credibility and meaning to that slightly out of touch and distorted image of Afghanistan, a country which has been at war for the last forty years, and which is going through a difficult time.

Were you well acquainted with Afghanistan?

Yes I was. I have made many television and radio documentaries there. The first time was in 2000, under the Taliban, for the French public radio channel France Culture. It was an intense and astonishing experience. I have returned about fifteen times since then.

Why did you choose cinema rather than radio for this project?

Because Shaheen is a filmmaker. And because it is the story of a man who fights to make images. So I thought that I had to tell this story through images. I have been on the radio for quite some time now, but before that, I had worked in the cinema industry for about ten years: writing articles for *Les Cahiers du Cinéma*, working as a screenwriter and in a production company... Cinema remains my first family.

Besides, I really need to push myself. With *Nothingwood*, I got my fair share of troubles. Shooting my first feature film in Afghanistan was a true challenge.





You focus on a man who directs films at the risk of his life, to make his life worth living. In doing so, you also question the boundaries between art and life...

I am interested in the ways art and life connect. I love this moment in the film when his cameraman recalls how they were hit by a rocket once while they were shooting, how they went to the hospital and then all went back to end the film on crutches... I often quote this line from Robert Filliou: "Art is what makes life more interesting than art." In a way, that is what my film is really about.

Did you know straight away that you would appear on screen?

I tried several devices. Finally, my director of photography, Alexandre Nanau, took it on himself to put me inside the frame, and then we realized it was the right solution. Alexandre directed *Toto and His Sisters*, a documentary that is very dear to my heart. I was glad that he accepted to be the director of photography of *Nothingwood*. He was inconspicuous, he remained silent but kept filming all the time, using light cameras, it was perfect. His images are exactly what I had in mind.

Except for the young actress at the beginning, you are the only woman to appear on screen. Which makes the absence of Afghan women even more conspicuous.

Shaheen has two wives, I know them but filming them was out of the question. Even though he never told me so directly, I know. He never said "no", but always found a good reason to avoid it. He didn't even want me to record their voices. Shaheen comes from a really traditional background, where there is a great deal of social pressure on women: a man can't show his wife's face, and even saying her first name is inappropriate! Shaheen is still the chieftain of his neighborhood, of his clan. Exposing his wife would be a disgrace.

As a woman, how were you accepted by Shaheen and his crew?

It was easy, because to them, I belong to a gray and therefore acceptable area: I am a stranger, I am not a Muslim and, above all, I am a director. So I cannot really be a woman!

Qurban Ali, the actor who likes to dress as a woman, brings a joyful exuberance that contrasts with the political and moral context of the country.

He also belongs to an acceptable realm. As long as he doesn't come out as a homosexual, his taste for gender role switching and cross-dressing is tolerated and even appreciated by the Afghan society, as a funny transgression or a game. Such surprising tolerance is displayed in many traditional societies, like in Japan for instance, or in Egypt, Thailand... Afghan society isn't as rigoristic as you might think. That's why it's so interesting to make documentaries about it and show that complexity!

Another moment in the film reveals that complexity: when a Taliban admits he enjoys watching Shaheen's films...

Theoretically, the Taliban are an armed movement based on a rigoristic vision of Islam which prohibits the representation of human beings. When I first went to Afghanistan, taking photographs of living creatures or filming them was prohibited. Only monuments, rivers, landscapes... were allowed. Representing animals was already an issue, and I even remember a surreal discussion on the status of insects! But that is the official line. No sooner had I arrived in Afghanistan than some Taliban asked me to take a picture of them on their pick-up, to keep a record of their stranglehold on Kabul! Their need for images was stronger. Then I thought that there must be some Taliban who actually liked Shaheen's films. And indeed, they were easy to find.

More than just some mere evidence of their hypocrisy, that scene shows how universal the childish desire to look at pictures is.

Sometimes Taliban fighters are just jobless youngsters from rural areas who find themselves enlisted almost against their wills, because they have nothing else to do. This scene also says a lot about Shaheen's political skills. He takes great care not to openly offend the Taliban. There isn't any Taliban character in his stories, and I heard that he sends DVDs of his films to measured Taliban leaders. Shaheen knows how to rally people, he is cunning as a fox!

Tell us more about the film's title.

It's a reference to Shaheen's phrase: "Here, it isn't Hollywood, it isn't Bollywood, it's Nothingwood." The joke also works in Persian. He tells it to anyone who will listen. You can have him do ten takes in a row! And it's true that this man has managed to make dreams out of nothing.

## AFGHANISTAN HISTORICAL TIMELINE

## SALIM SHAHEEN KEY DATES

- 1964 - 65 ou 66** Enlightened monarch Zahir Shah's constitutional monarchy. Afghanistan opens up to the West and embraces modernity. First democratic elections, involving communists.
- 1973 - 78** Daoud Khan's republic, after his coup overthrowing Zahir.
- 1978** Communist coup.
- 1979 - 80** Soviet invasion. The Mujaheddin resistance starts to organize itself.
- 1981** The resistance against the Soviet gets stronger. Massoud frees the Pandjshir valley.
- 1982** The Maymana fort is attacked by the Mujahideen. The fort is held by Afghan and Soviet troops.
- 1984** Growing involvement of Pakistan (and the US) in the Soviet-Afghan war.
- 1985** The CIA, via Pakistan, starts providing the Afghan rebellion with surface-to-air missiles. They will change the course of the war.
- 1987** Mohammad Najibullah becomes President. The Soviet start contemplating a possible defeat.
- 1989 - 92** The Soviet troops withdraw from Afghanistan.
- 1992** Fall of the communist regime. Beginning of the Civil War between the former Mujahideen groups fighting for power.
- 1993 - 95** The Civil War makes tens of thousands of casualties in Kabul.
- 1996** The Taliban enter Kabul and establish an Islamic Emirate over the whole country, apart from a north-east area where Massoud keeps resisting. All images of living things are prohibited.
- 2001** Intervention of the international coalition. Fall of the Taliban regime.
- 2004 - 09** Hamid Karzai is elected President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The country is seething with excitement. Cinemas reopen. But corruption becomes widespread.
- 2009 - 15** The Taliban slowly regain control of most of the country. Half of it by day and two thirds by night, so they say. They cause more and more attacks.
- 2015 - 17** Daesh makes a breakthrough and commits suicides attacks in Kabul and across the country.
- Shaheen was born in Kabul, in the neighborhood of Shar-e Now. His father is a member of the police force.
- Shaheen watches his first films at Park Cinema.
- Shaheen starts directing his first short films.
- Shaheen flees to Iran. His brother is killed on the battle front.
- Shaheen comes back from Iran. He is enrolled for military service in the regular Afghan army.
- Shaheen hides among the dead and is the only survivor of the Afghan armed forces' attack.
- End of his military service. Shaheen goes back to Kabul. Arranged wedding with his first wife.
- Shaheen buys a VHS camera and directs his first feature film, *The Undefeated*.
- Shaheen makes films for "Afghan Film", Afghanistan's state-run film company.
- Shaheen creates "Shaheen Films".
- Shaheen opens a makeshift cinema in a basement.
- On the set of Shaheen's film *Gardab*, ten people get killed by a rocket. Second wedding.
- Shaheen narrowly escapes the Taliban, yet they manage to burn many of his films. He flees to Pakistan. He shoots several films there, including *Dairin*, in which he plays a tea seller.
- Shaheen shoots about ten films a year. It is the Golden Age of his career.
- Shaheen tourne environ dix films par an. C'est l'âge d'or de son cinéma.
- Shaheen only makes four or five films a year.
- Shaheen makes about ten films a year - including *The Land of the Brave*, about the reconciliation - and takes part in *Nothingwood*.



# KABUL MOVIE THEATERS

Shaheen's films are shown in Kabul's movie theaters. There were about twenty of them in the 1970s, and they were the pride and joy of the Afghan cosmopolitan elite. Back then, the audience would watch classic movies, films from the French New Waves and a few Afghan films. All movie theaters were destroyed by more than thirty years of war. Some of them have been rebuilt since 2002, with international funds or governmental aids. There are now seven movie theaters in Kabul, and four of them are operational. They show Pakistani films in Pashto, American thrillers and a few Afghan films. Most films come from Bollywood.

Moviegoers walk in and out of the theater as they please. They eat, smoke, drink very casually. They answer the phone, call out to an acquaintance in the crowd, applaud at particularly exciting scenes, clap to the music and sometimes even get up on stage to dance. There are only a few children and not a single woman in the audience, even though they are theoretically allowed to come.

Most projectors were imported from India about thirty years ago and work with carbon arc lamps, a technique that was replaced in the West in the 1960s. Shaheen's films are usually shown for a few weeks. Then they are sold on DVDs across the country and/or shown on one of the 175 television channels in Afghanistan.





# CREW

Written & Directed by **Sonia Kronlund**

Photography **Alexander Nanau**  
**Eric Guichard**  
Sound **Matthieu Perrot**  
**Hassan Shabankareh**  
Editing **Sophie Brunet**  
**George Cragg**  
Producer **Laurent Lavolé / Gloria Films**  
Coproducer **Melanie Andernach / Made in Germany**

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# SONIA KRONLUND

The daughter of a French mother and a Swedish father, a former student of the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure and a literature graduate, Sonia Kronlund has taken part in the writing of many scripts, has directed documentaries and run several collections for television. After writing in *Les Cahiers du Cinéma* for a short time, she started working on French public radio station France Inter in 1995. Since 2002, she has been producing the daily documentary program *Les Pieds sur Terre* on France Culture radio station.

For some reason, she has taken an immoderate interest in Iran and Afghanistan, two countries which she has visited on a regular basis for the past fifteen years. She has made several television and radio documentaries there, for Arte television network and France Culture. In 2012, her collection of stories, *Nouvelles du réel*, was published by Actes Sud. *Nothingwood* is her first feature film.



