

LIMBO (12A)

Dir. Ben Sharrock



2020 | 104 mins

Wed 16 Jun

Ben Sharrock's *Limbo* tells the story of a young Syrian musician seeking asylum in Scotland.

The following interview was taken from an interview with Europa Cinema and director Ben Sharrock in 2020 after playing in New Directors at the San Sebastián Film Festival.

What was the genesis of *Limbo*?

It started out with a strong personal desire to make a film that, broadly speaking, would touch on the subject of the “refugee crisis” by focusing on the individual human experience of a Syrian asylum seeker. I graduated in Arabic and Politics, and as part of the degree, I lived in Damascus the year before the civil war broke out. At university, I wrote my dissertation on Arab and Muslim

representations in American cinema and TV. When the “refugee crisis” became very prevalent in the media, I started to question the dehumanising representations of refugees – a faceless mass that was being demonised or pitied. My producer, **Irene Gurtubai**, and I did some work in refugee camps with an NGO in southern Algeria, which coincided with a research trip for an unmade short film. Our project focused on the identity of being a refugee. After that, I set out to write the screenplay with a big list of things that I wanted to avoid – sensationalising the subject and using a Western character as a vehicle to tell this story were at the top of the list.

Remarkably, you capture this in a deadpan comedic style.

True to my sensibilities and style as

a filmmaker, it had to have absurdist elements, and I wanted to use humour, too. Most of this absurdity is, in fact, based on reality. Asylum seekers being sent to a remote Scottish island is fictional, but it is quite common in Northern Europe for asylum seekers to be sent to remote communities.

How did you research the refugee centres?

Conducting important and valuable research was connected to understanding people who had been through the asylum system and thinking of them beyond the things that are related to them being refugees. There is a wealth of material on the subject matter from documentaries, books, academic essays and newspaper articles. I consumed everything I possibly could for over a year and met with people who had been through the asylum system in the UK, plus people who work with NGOs that work with refugees on a day-to-day basis. I really connected with the story of one individual, in particular, specifically in terms of the focus on identity. His story impacted me immensely and really connected with Omar's internal journey. He, along with other refugees living in Scotland, ended up coming out to Uist to be in the film.

Was it special to see *Limbo* at San Sebastián?

The Zinemaldia is a really special festival for me because my career started here with *Pikadero*. The

festival propelled our small, Basque-language film into the international festival circuit and created some critical headlines in the newspapers when we really needed them. We were able to make *Limbo* because of *Pikadero*, and some of what *Pikadero* became is because of the San Sebastián Film Festival and José Luis Rebordinos' support. It was a great opportunity for us to show the film to an audience in the cinema and be there to witness it. It was a real gift during these times of COVID.

This special preview screening of *Limbo* is taking place in partnership with Refugee Week Exeter as part of Refugee Week 14-16 June 2021.