

Subobscura Films
Tomsa Films

& Katrafay Films
present

Zaho Aiz



Produced by
THOMAS LAMBERT
MAEVA RANAIVOJAONA
GEORG TILLER

Narration Written by
RAHARIMANANA

Cinematography by
GEORG TILLER

Editing by
BARBARA BOSSUET

Narrator
NABIHA AKKARI

Original Music
ANDRÉ FEVRE
GAHMS

Cast
EUGENE RAPHAEL
RANAIVOJAONA
MICHELLE EVA
RANAIVOJAONA

With the financial
support of

Bundesministerium
Kunst, Kultur,
öffentlicher Dienst und Sport

A Ranaivojaona Tiller film



Zaho Zay

A Ranaivojaona Tiller film

SUBOBSCURA FILMS, TOMSA FILMS IN ASSOCIATION WITH
KATRAFAY FILMS PRESENT » ZAHO ZAY «
A RANAÏVOJAONA TILLER FILM
SUPPORTED BY BUNDESMINISTERIUM FÜR KUNST, KULTUR,
ÖFFENTLICHEN DIENST UND SPORT
PRODUCERS
THOMAS LAMBERT, MAÉVA RANAÏVOJAONA, GEORG TILLER
NARRATION WRITTEN BY RAHARIMANANA
CINEMATOGRAPHY GEORG TILLER
EDIT BARBARA BOSSUET
ORIGINAL MUSIC ANDRÉ FÈVRE, GAHMS

Subobscura
Films

tonsa

Katrafay
Films



SYNOPSIS

A young woman works as a guard in a hopelessly overcrowded prison in Madagascar. She passes the time daydreaming about her father, a murderer who abandoned her as a child after killing his own brother.

In her imagination, her father becomes a mythical killer, wandering the countryside and rolling enchanted dice to decide the fate of his victims.

Secretly, she yearns for the day he might turn up amongst the prisoners. When a new inmate arrives claiming to know her father, the young woman's fantasies begin to turn to nightmares.







DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Iny hono izy ravorombazaha

*Iny hono izy ravorombazaha
Ento misidina mankany antsaha
Ento misidina ambony
Rahefa mangina avereno,
O o o o, oooooo.*

Here's My Baby, Oh Beautiful Foreign Bird
(Malagasy Lullaby)

*White bird from afar,
take my baby away
Fly with her high up in the sky,
and if she hushes, bring her back to me.
O o o o, oooooo.*

CLAIRE LASOLLE ON ZAHO ZAY

« Nothing grows here, neither the mockery of the poor nor the fat laughter of power ». A text weaves throughout the film, mobilizing the evocative power of words that concentrates in a rebel's poetry and the violent clash of individual against collective history. Crude words respond to brutal destinies.

From the bridge between past and present, Zaho Zay hunts down the traumas of childhood and of Madagascar. Lullabies and children's tales reawaken the bruises of History, both great and small, while ancestral knowledges survive in the texture of images, of gestures, and of traditions. Wherever the past imprisons, images resist, and words resuscitate.

Zaho Zay is an elegy in two movements. The first one follows the erratic figure of a murderer on the run as he crosses between realities. The second one, with documentary dryness, stays tied to the sedentary destinies of the prisoners piled up in one of the island's overcrowded prisons.

A woman's voice, alone, weaves both movements together in the unity of the text, her silences and accents giving shape to the body of images. It is the intimate address of a prison guard to her absent father, the criminal on the run, onto whom she projects the mythical traits of the Betsileo, an indigenous group living in the Southeast of Madagascar.

The text is rooted in the memory of this spectral father, this murderer pictured as a lonely cowboy, throwing dice as he plays with his victims' luck.

Images of the Madagascar's contradictory realities arise out of childhood recollections. In these dream-like sequences, the film takes on the free and generous shape of a series of associations outpacing pure, narrative logic.

Moving from the fenced-in lives of those struggling to subsist in an overloaded and meaningless jail system, to the tranquil work of silk weavers, from scenes of Katrafay culture, to barren landscapes and empty hotels fatefully awaiting rich clients, Zaho Zay unveils the complex present of an island profoundly marked by its colonial past, with a nostalgia for lost freedom and innocence. Zaho Zay: the Red Island's state of mind.

BILLY WOODBERRY ON ZAHO ZAY

„a world mysterious and vague”
Bob Dylan

The cinematography, mise en scene and structure of the film, „Zaho Zay“, very accomplished and impressive. The film functions in a more poetic level than as a traditional narrative or dramatic work, mythic or as a legend. Not everything can be explained or perhaps need be.

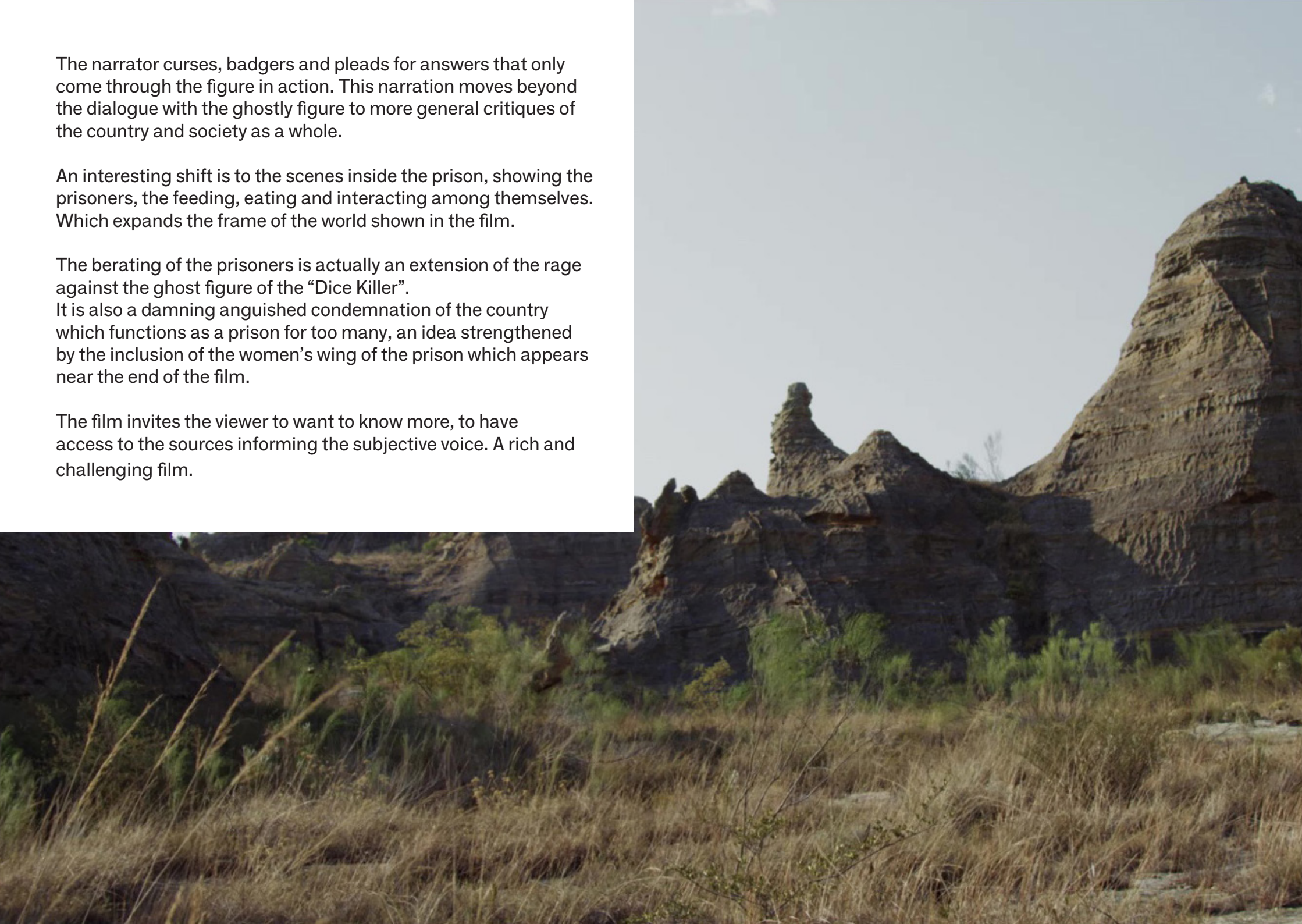
Yet the subject the narrator is engaged with a ghostly figure, that remains mute and refuses to reply or explain. One who is never there...a “fugitive” that stays on the move, which allows the film to travel and reveal a rather vast geography, landscapes, natural and human. He is present even when those encountering him, hardly acknowledge his presence.

The narrator curses, badgers and pleads for answers that only come through the figure in action. This narration moves beyond the dialogue with the ghostly figure to more general critiques of the country and society as a whole.

An interesting shift is to the scenes inside the prison, showing the prisoners, the feeding, eating and interacting among themselves. Which expands the frame of the world shown in the film.

The berating of the prisoners is actually an extension of the rage against the ghost figure of the “Dice Killer”. It is also a damning anguished condemnation of the country which functions as a prison for too many, an idea strengthened by the inclusion of the women’s wing of the prison which appears near the end of the film.

The film invites the viewer to want to know more, to have access to the sources informing the subjective voice. A rich and challenging film.





OLAF MÖLLER & MARCO CIPOLLINI IN CONVERSATION WITH MAÉVA RANAÏVOJAONA, GEORG TILLER & RAHARIMANANA

OLAF MÖLLER: To start with something simple: How did the three of you find one another? And when was it clear that this would be the foundation for a film? Which also should clarify how you, Georg, found your way to Madagascar...!

GEORG TILLER: Maéva and I began working together on her second short film *Phasme* (2016), which I assistant-directed. After that, we collaborated on numerous projects, producing each other's films, co-authoring scripts.

MAÉVA RANAÏVOJAONA: Working together for so long, we had begun to develop our own cinematic language. We were ready to put it to the test, by co-directing something. I came up with an idea for a film set in Madagascar, a country I hadn't visited anymore since my childhood.

GT: But that was for another film entirely: a fiction involving time travel, which we are developing! We went to Madagascar to location scout for that project, and that was when we shot what would eventually become *Zaho Zay*. Raharimanana came on board once we had a rough cut.

OM: Maéva and Georg, why did you decide to write & direct this film together? I'm asking because you also have your solo projects?

GT: While we were scouting, the images we were capturing were so incredible. So I suggested: why not start working on a little side project.

MR: From then on, we went along shooting scenes as we were scouting. My uncle, our driver, became the star of our film. For me, it was an intensely personal experience—my father's family is from Madagascar. Yet, having Georg there, an outsider to Malagasy culture, freed both of us to be more playful.

MARCO CIPOLLINI: The film is sustained by the protagonist's voice-over, brightly written by the Malagasy poet and writer Raharimanana. What was the process of writing this voice? And how did you collaborate together?

RAHARIMANANA: I received an absolutely unheard-of proposal: would I be ready to create a story about a film that was already edited, based on a very precise idea by Georg and Maéva – exploring the fascination of a loving daughter for her criminal father? The images tell a story I am familiar with: landscapes and the penitentiary world in Madagascar. My blank page was a *carte blanche*. I scrutinized every shot, listened to the images, I wanted to hear the voice before I created the story. Then we reviewed the editing before writing. We made some adjustments, found a meaning for the whole thing and finally came up with the film.

MR: While I was researching precolonial Madagascar at the Bulac library in Paris, I came across a small book, Raharimanana's "Dreams under the Shroud". The writing mixed dense, imagery-filled poetry, with an utterly violent lexicon; I was hooked right away and read it in one go, standing among the shelves. Once we had made some progress with the editing of *Zaho Zay*, finding the right person to write the voice-over was a no-brainer: we needed to create a female narrator that didn't exist on screen, a soul that was at once tormented by the small and big history of the Red Island, politically aware and special – Raharimanana.

MC: The narrator's voice – characterized by a subtle blending of the lyrical register with a raw and brutal lexicon – advances with repetitive forms, variations, circular movements that accompany the evolution of the story, creating a musical structure that in some ways recalls the oral tradition. Why did you opt for this treatment?

R: In my opinion, cinema is also music. The voice of an actor may leave its mark on you forever. The narrator hardly appears on screen, so I had to give her a strong voice. Therefore, I worked on each syllable as if it were a musical note, either in harmony or in conflict with others. The film became a partition. Some shots necessitated a blunt and brutal sound impact. Others required lyricism or mystery. Through progressive tension, I wanted to get to this famous lullaby in Madagascar: Ravorona. The bird that takes you on a wonderful trip. Orality is a feature of my work, but above all I think that musicality is the key in films. You watch a film, but you also listen to it.

OM: Why did it have to be a daughter-father narrative? With whom of you did this originate?

MR: At first I thought it would be a kind of metaphysical gangster film: the story of a lonely killer wandering the physical and spiritual landscapes of Madagascar

GT: I love multi-layered narratives, so I suggested: What if this is all just the fantasy of the killer's daughter? What if this is the story of an invented murderer?

MR: We both have... challenging relationships with our families. So, it was not hard for us to imagine the layers, upon layers, of complication involved.

MC: The exploration of the island follows in the footsteps of the protagonist's missing father, who is transformed by his daughter's imagination into a ruthless Betsileo murderer. How did you work on the creation of this mythical figure?

GT: In researching the complex pre-colonial history of Madagascar, we started to focus on the Betsileo tribe. Madagascar has 18 distinctive ethnic groups, some of which differ greatly in their appearance, traditions, and beliefs. The Betsileo live in the highlands, the part of the island where most of Maeva's family is located, so we wanted to play with Betsileo imagery and oral histories. Murder and thievery have a significant place in the Betsileo culture. The theft of zebus (Malagasy oxen) is a sort of initiation ritual for young men. Revenge murders are a common crime.

OM: As the film is very much about things being unsaid and empty spaces being left: The word coup is used often in the text, in its meaning of slap or jab as well as of throw (of dices we see so often) – but one almost starts to wait for it also being used in its meaning of political overthrow, following a line by Jules Michelet. Not a question, more a thought, in case someone feels like saying something in response to it.

GT: Madagascar is, according to various measures, one of the poorest countries in the world. It is one of the few where the economy has been in continuous decline since the 1970's.

MR: The idea of „fihavanana“ is central to Malagasy culture. It means kinship, friendship, and harmony between beings both physical and spiritual. There is a lot to learn from this concept, but it has also had a conservative influence on politics. Protest is rare and often futile. A throw of the dice, a repetitive gesture without any real consequences, is as good a metaphor as any other.



OM: Something very practical for Maéva and Georg: How do you work together on the set in very hands-down turns – who does what, and why do you organize yourselves in this way?

GT: We each did a bit of everything. I did more of the cinematographer, but we storyboarded scenes together. As in my previous films, I tended to shoot static shots, avoiding wide angles, to keep the cinematic space tight.

MR: It was very spontaneous. One of us would envision a scene and take the camera, the other the microphone. When we encountered difficulties, the other was there to back us up. On the road, living together, filmmaking becomes a total way of life. We might be at a market to pick up groceries, and, suddenly, staring at a piece of ham, a script idea would come to mind! It just never stopped.

OM: Who are the actors in the film? So many of them share your family name, Maeva, and you already mentioned your uncle...

MR: Most are members of my family! They are spread across the island, working in all kinds of fields, from lawyers to bus drivers. They were all so excited to be in the film, we hope that we can continue working this way in the future...

OM: Midway through the film, we see a vast, public ceremony. It resembles a kind of funeral, except the crowds are so raucous and music is so cheery. What is going on here?

GT: It is one of the most important festivities in Madagascar: the Famadihana, or “turning of the bones”. Every seven years, the clans of Madagascar remove their ancestors’ remains from their impressively decorated, family tombs. They dance with their cloth-wrapped bones, and then wrap them in new, expensive coverings. Sometimes this involves of several hundred corpses.

M: The Famadihana is extremely intriguing for Western viewers, but it is often misunderstood. That is why we decided to film it in this very light and open way rather than sensationalistically: it is a celebration, not something macabre.

OM: How were you able to film in the prison? Was it difficult to get permission? And how did you approach the inmates, as well as the guards?

MR: Some of my family members founded an NGO called „Manarina“ that deals with prisoner’s rights in Madagascar. They wanted us to shoot a promotional video for them, so we asked if, in return, we could also shoot images for our own project. The NGO is well connected with the Ministry of Justice, and so getting permission to shoot at Finarantsoa Penitentiary was easy. We had absolute freedom, and staff and inmates alike were very interested in our project.

GT: It was extremely important for us to involve the inmates in a meaningful way. We wanted to capture the absurd poetry of life in such an overcrowded and impoverished place, while preserving the dignity of these men and women by allowing them to show us their reality on their own terms.

MC: Dice are often used as symbols of chance and serve as a leitmotiv in the film. They are used by the killer to decide the fate of his victims. If you were to suggest a key to interpreting this element of the film, would it be?

GT/MR: As fans of true crime podcasts, we first of all were looking for a characteristic trait for our killer—something obsessive, meaningless, yet decisive. Games of chances are also an important part of the Malagasy culture. On top of that, ending up in jail in Madagascar seems to be mostly a matter of bad luck, since the justice system there does not work at all for people without means. One could be stuck in jail for years before going to trial...

... More generally, film noir, especially Western noir, was an influence. We like to think of the film as a „Malagasy noir.“ When we were researching films that also featured dice as a trope, we were especially intrigued by Raoul Ruiz’s little known short film “Zig-Zag – le jeu de L’oie (1980)”.

MC: The film opens and closes with images of ruins and the sound of a lullaby, instilling a sense of nostalgia for a joyful, lost childhood. Could you comment on this choice?

GT: Both of us have fathers who migrated in their early twenties to the countries where we ourselves were later born. So, our fathers’ pasts remain eternal mysteries to us. One obviously can never know much about the childhoods of one’s parents, but the cultural and geographical distance here added, for each of us, another impenetrable wall, another cause of nostalgia for a forever lost past. I often think one can never fully recover from the trauma of childhood.

MR: The lullaby is well known in Madagascar. In the traditional version of the song, the lyrics ask for a bird to come take one’s child and comfort it. In the film, we use a more modern version of the song that goes, „White bird from abroad, take my child.“ The influence of colonialism on even the deepest, most intimate parts of Malagasy life is very sad and tragic. In our film, the lullaby takes on another poignant meaning when it is revealed that the narrator herself is in jail. She gives it another interpretation: The colonial, white bird took not the baby, but its childhood, and never brought it back.







RENAUD VICTOR PRIZE



SPECIAL MENTION
GEORGES DE BEAUREGARD
INTERNATIONAL

International Competition George de Beauregard Special Mention (Jury consisted of Nobuhiro Suwa, Manon de Boer, Silvia Cruz, Michel Lipkes & Adrian Paci):

The jury decided to award a Special Mention to this film, in which memory, desire, magic, brutality, individuality and collectivity, land, man and animal, mix together in a well-orchestrated harmony to an end, not of peaceful coexistence, but of confronting the spectator with a space of continuous tension between all these elements. The film offers research poetic but also precise, on personal and collective roots, not as a nostalgic process, but as an adventure full of tenderness, desire, and anger.



BIOGRAPHY MAÉVA RANAÏVOJAONA

Maéva Ranaivojaona is a French-Malagasy writer, director and producer living and working in Paris and Vienna. Her short films have been shown and awarded at international film festivals including the Rotterdam Film festival and the Cannes Short Film Corner.

In 2016 she was invited as a producer to the FIDLab in Marseille where she was awarded the Air France prize. In 2017 she opened the Paris office of Subobscura Films together with Austrian producer and director Georg Tiller. „Zaho Zay“ is her first feature film.

FILMOGRAPHY

(Selection)

2020 ZAHO ZAY
2016 PHASME
2012 DOMICILIE



BIOGRAPHY GEORG TILLER

Georg Tiller was born in Vienna, Austria. After unfinished philosophy and theater studies, he studied film and television studies with Harun Farocki and film directing and cinematography with Michael Haneke and Christian Berger.

As the head of the production company Subobscura Films, based in Vienna and Paris, he has produced and directed several award-winning feature films, documentaries and experimental works.

FILMOGRAPHY

(Selection)

2020 ZAHO ZAY
2016 OVERNIGHT FLIES
2015 WHITE COAL
2014 DMD KIU LIDT
2011 PERSONA BEACH
2008 KM 43.3 TRANSYLVANIAN TIMBER



BIOGRAPHY

RAHARIMANANA

(born 1967 in Antananarivo, Madagascar)

Raharimanana is a writer, poet, playwright, actor and musician. He left his country at the age of 22, after one of his plays had been banned, and took up residence in France. The play, entitled *The Prophet and the President*, received the Tchicaya U'tamsi Prize for Inter-African Theatre in 1990.

After a period spent studying at the Sorbonne and at the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilisations, he became a journalist and then a teacher. Raharimanana abandoned everything to dedicate himself wholeheartedly to literature. Joining words together and building up their meaning up to the point where their musicality penetrates into the reader's innermost depths, has become his main concern in life.

He is the author of several books of fiction and poetry, which have earned him various literary distinctions, including *Nour 1947* (2003) about the history of the counter-colonial uprisings that took place in 1947, in Madagascar; *Rêves sous le linceul* [*Dreams under the Shroud*], written in the aftermath of *Nour 1947*, but also marked by images of the genocide in Ruanda, the Yugoslavian war and the reading of the texts *Las Casas* about the extermination of the indigenous peoples and slavery, received the Grand Prix Littéraire de Madagascar, 1996; *Les cauchemars du gecko* [*The Gecko's Nightmares*], the Ouessant Island Poetry Prize, 2011 and *Revenir* [*Return*], the Jacques Lacarrière Prize, 2018.

His books have been translated into German, Italian, Spanish and English. The author of countless theatre plays and musical stories, Raharimanana brings his texts to the stage, having founded the SoaZara company in 2014, in which he brings together playwrights, musicians, video makers and dancers.

In 2019, he wrote the screenplay for the film *Zaho Zay* about the Malagasy prison system, which was elected for competition at FIDMarseille 2020 – 31st Marseille International Film Festival and La Viennale 2020 – Vienna International Film Festival.



CAST Eugene Raphaël Ranaivojaona Dice Killer
Michelle Eva Ranaivojaona The Daughter
Nabiha Akkari Narrator
Jean Aimé The Child
Yvonne Michelle Ravelojaona Queen of Katrafay
Monsieur Roboson The Old Man
Fulgence Ranaivojaona The Brother
Marka Ravelojaona Victim 1

WITH THE STAFF AND INMATES OF FINARANTSOA
PRISON

CREW Writers, Directors
Maéva Ranaivojaona & Georg Tiller
Producers
Thomas Lambert, Maéva Ranaivojaona & Georg Tiller
Narration written by
Raharimanana
Cinematography
Georg Tiller
Editing
Barbara Bossuet
Original Music & Sound Design
André Fèvre
Sound Recording
Terence Meunier & Herimandresy Randriambololona
Color Grading & VFX
Andreas Daxer
Assistant Editor
Muriel Bucher
Translations
Patrick Harrison

TECH Length 79 Minutes
Format DCP
Ratio 2:1

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Vienna Office
Auhofstraße 43
1130 Wien

Paris Office
51 rue Doudeauville
75018 Paris

www.subobscurafilms.com
info@subobscurafilms.com

INTERNATIONAL SALES



42 rue d'Avron
75020 Paris

thomas@tomsa-films.com





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