

Emilie GEORGES Hiner SALEEM Alexandre MALLET-GUY present



FESTIVAL DE CANNES

OFFICIAL SELECTION

COMPETITION

KILOMETRE ★ZERO

A film by **HINER SALEEM**

France-Kurdistan / 2005 / 96'

In colour / 35 mm / 1.85 / Dolby SRD

Visa n° 112.666

For downloadable images and press kit

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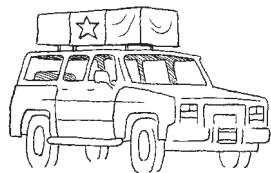


SYNOPSIS

Iraq, 1988... Young husband and father Ako is forced to join Saddam Hussein's army. The unwilling soldier dreams of fleeing the country, but his wife Selma refuses to leave while her old bedridden father is still alive. Ako is sent away to the frontline of the Iran-Iraq War, where he experiences not only the reality of war, but also abuse due to his Kurdish background.

The desperate man considers drastic measures for a fast ticket home. Ako thinks it's his lucky day when he receives orders to escort the return of a fellow soldier's corpse to his family. But his driver turns out to be an anti-Kurd Arab. With flag-wrapped coffin in tow, the mismatched duo prepares for an unexpected voyage across the majestic Iraqi landscape. Ako won't miss his chance to trick the driver into heading north toward the Kurdistan region...

HINER SALEEM



Hiner Saleem directed the internationally popular **VODKA LEMON**, winner of the Contro Corrente Grand Prize at the 2003 Venice Film Festival.

Saleem, a Paris resident for the past 10 years, was born in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1964. At 17, he fled to Italy via Syria to escape Saddam Hussein's oppressive regime. A fervent advocate for Kurdish rights, he recognizes April 9, 2003 - the fall of Saddam Hussein - as the most beautiful day in his life.

KILOMETRE ZERO is his fourth film and marks the first time he shoots a film in his native Iraqi Kurdistan. Hiner Saleem is also an acclaimed author. His autobiographical *My Father's Rifle : A Childhood in Kurdistan* has been published in over a dozen countries.

FILMOGRAPHY

- 2005** **KILOMETRE ZERO**
Official selection in competition - Cannes 2005
- 2003** **VODKA LEMON**
Contro Corrente Grand Prize - Venice 2003
Official Selection - Toronto 2003
- 1999** **PASSEURS DE RÊVES (BEYOND OUR DREAMS)**
- 1997** **VIVE LA MARIÉE... ET LA LIBÉRATION DU KURDISTAN**
(**LONG LIVE THE BRIDE... AND THE LIBERATION OF KURDISTAN**)
Best Script - Angers Film Festival (France)



NAZMÎ KIRIK as **AKO**

Nazmî Kirik is perhaps best-known for his role in 1999's Turkish film **JOURNEY TO THE SUN** (dir. Yesim Ustaoglu), an award-winner at the Berlin Film Festival. His other film credits include 2003's **A LITTLE BIT OF FREEDOM** (dir. Yüksel Yavuz) and 2001's **THE PHOTOGRAPH** (dir. Kazim Oz). Also a theatre actor, Kirik lives in Kurdistan of Turkey.



BELCIM BILGIN as **SELMA**

Born in Ankara in 1983, Belcim Bilgin is a theatre actress. Hiner Saleem's **KILOMETRE ZERO** is her first film role.



EYAM EKREM as **THE DRIVER**

Eyam Ekrem is one of Iraqi Kurdistan's most popular TV performers. Hiner Saleem's **KILOMETRE ZERO** is his first film role.





INTERVIEW



How did KILOMETRE ZERO originate?

The day Saddam Hussein and his regime were toppled, I was shooting my film VODKA LEMON in Armenia. I was so happy I only had one desire : to be over there with my people in Iraqi Kurdistan. As soon as I got back to France, I decided to go to Iraq and shoot a film in Kurdistan. I started letting people know about my plans. Everyone found the project very interesting. So I went there, even without waiting for the financing to be in place. I went there without knowing if I would stay two weeks or eight weeks. I ended up staying four months.

How did it feel to return to the country you fled 20 years ago?

I cried with joy seeing the Kurds free. But they have suffered so much that they aren't able to see to what extent the situation is still fragile. They refuse to have their dream trampled on... But I was still overwhelmed by the joy of seeing them happy and free. The whole experience was a mixture of strong emotions.

What sort of difficulties did you encounter?

The biggest problem was finding a camera and dealing with the negative. There wasn't a working camera in the whole country. It's important to understand that Iraq has produced only about five films in its entire history. Making this film took a lot of improvisation and quick-thinking. We also had to work very fast. No one could be sure about how the situation was going to evolve.

Despite the complicated conditions you worked under during the shooting of KILOMETRE ZERO, you were able to meet the ambitious demands of the project...

Since it's a road movie, we had to shoot in numerous locations with a lot of sets and extras... The Kurdistan authorities helped us. The film takes place at the end of the 1980's, just before the end of the war against Iran. Since this is a period film, it was about reconstructing a whole world which had already disappeared. By the time I arrived, it was already impossible to find a soldier's uniform from Saddam Hussein's army. Even photographs of him were almost impossible to find there...

I fled my country at 17. Things have changed a lot since then. For example, the Iraqi national anthem was not the same one I knew as a child. One of the crewmembers reminded me of this. The same goes for the Iraqi flag. Saddam Hussein's Iraq saw three different versions of the national flag. The colors changed order, a star was added... The flags in the film actually had to be made. We didn't forget the spelling mistake in the inscription «Allah is the greatest». Saddam himself had written it originally in his own blood. No one had dared tell him that he had made a spelling mistake...

For someone who was forced to flee his country, wasn't it painful working with those omnipresent images of Saddam Hussein?

It's like still living with him! He was everywhere, in books, in notebooks... Everywhere you looked, you could see his photo - on a thoroughbred horse and holding a sword, in full military dress and holding a Kalashnikov weapon, kneeling on a prayer mat facing Mecca... And all his famous titles : «President and Commander-in-Chief», «Knight of the Arab Nation and Guardian of the Oriental Gate», «Vanquisher of the Zionists», «Pride of the Tigris and the Euphrates»...

Saddam is one of the film's main characters. His presence haunts the film with his giant roadside portraits, his speeches on TV and radio, and above all, the imposing statue of him which seems to follow the character of Ako during his entire voyage.

Where did you find that statue of Saddam Hussein?

It was made for the film... All the Kurdish sculptors I contacted refused. I managed to convince an Arab sculptor. It took weeks to find him, but he finally accepted. For security reasons, it was unthinkable to cross the whole country with a giant statue of Saddam. So we decided to have the sculptor work in Kurdistan. He worked in the courtyard of the house he was staying in. When the statue started to take on its real dimensions, its head rose beyond the walls. The authorities quickly responded. «Our Saddam» was confiscated and the sculptor was put in jail. I had a lot of explaining to do to the authorities to release both of them.

You turn to laughter in the most difficult situations, like battle in the trenches. You manage to add touches of humor and gaiety to tragic events...

I deal with some very serious, very grave, issues. But I try to keep them simple and without taking myself too seriously. I didn't want the battle scenes to become spectacular. I didn't want to sensationalize or fall into melodrama.



As for humor, I guess I got that from my grandfather. He used to say : «Our past is sad, our present is tragic, but luckily we have no future». In the most tragic moments, we always find some comic detail, some absurd situation. The Kurds - like any people who has suffered much difficulty - we have learned to see the comic and absurd. This sense of humor has helped us to survive.

KILOMETRE ZERO is a film about dictatorship and war involving harsh and oppressive violence. But you chose to not show the bloody face of these horrors...

It's probably a question of decency. What I show on film, what I say, is nothing compared to the anger inside of me. Maybe one day I'll manage to express it fully. In KILOMETRE ZERO, I wanted to recreate an atmosphere. To bring to life the feeling of the dictatorship. It might have been easier for me to tell a simple, realistic concrete story. Every Kurd has dozens of stories inside of him or her.

Where did the idea of the soldier forced to leave for the front come from?

That story is based on my brother who deserted the Iraqi army. I started the project from the idea of this reluctant soldier and I developed the screenplay little by little during the shoot.

How would you describe the road relationship between the Kurdish soldier and his Arab driver?

They're like two time bombs. We have no idea when they're going to explode. Maybe five minutes, maybe five hours or five years... But one thing is for sure : they will explode.

Without asking our opinion, we were annexed with Iraq. Majority Arab rule repeatedly refused to give us what it gave to itself. I learned their language, but I don't really know the Arabs. I only know their military police and soldiers.

Do you consider your film to be political?

No, it's not a political film. Even if I consider myself to be a very political person. I'm very interested in current events. I constantly need to know what's going on. But I'm not a militant filmmaker. I'm just someone in passing who observes what's going on in the world and tells stories about it. In a way, I make films because I don't have the power to change the world. Above all, I love life. Because of my love for life, I would like the Kurds to be free. I want to see my sister, my brother, free. Then I would be truly happy.

What does the title KILOMETRE ZERO refer to?

KILOMETRE ZERO is a reference to the fact that we're still in the same place. Iraq was created some 80 years ago and the country has not taken a single step forward.

That could be a reason to lose hope. Or even to hope, if one prefers. If the starting point is zero, you can only move forward.

KILOMETRE ZERO ends with hope...

Yes, we can say it closes on a moment of hope. But I don't think that's really the ending. We don't know what the future holds in store for us. Saddam's regime has fallen. This is extraordinary. But there's no guarantee that things will work out. Let's just say that in this interval, we'll have time to breathe for a moment...





IRAQI KURDISTAN: IMPORTANT DATES

1919. Kurdistan is recognized by the Treaty of Sevres, but the treaty would never be applied.

1923. Kurdistan is divided by the Treaty of Lausanne : Turkey (20 million Kurds), Iran (9 million), Iraq (6 million), Syria (2 million).

1980. Start of the Iran-Iraq War. Many Iraqi Kurds side with Iranian forces. Saddam Hussein's regime increases his action against the Kurdish minority.

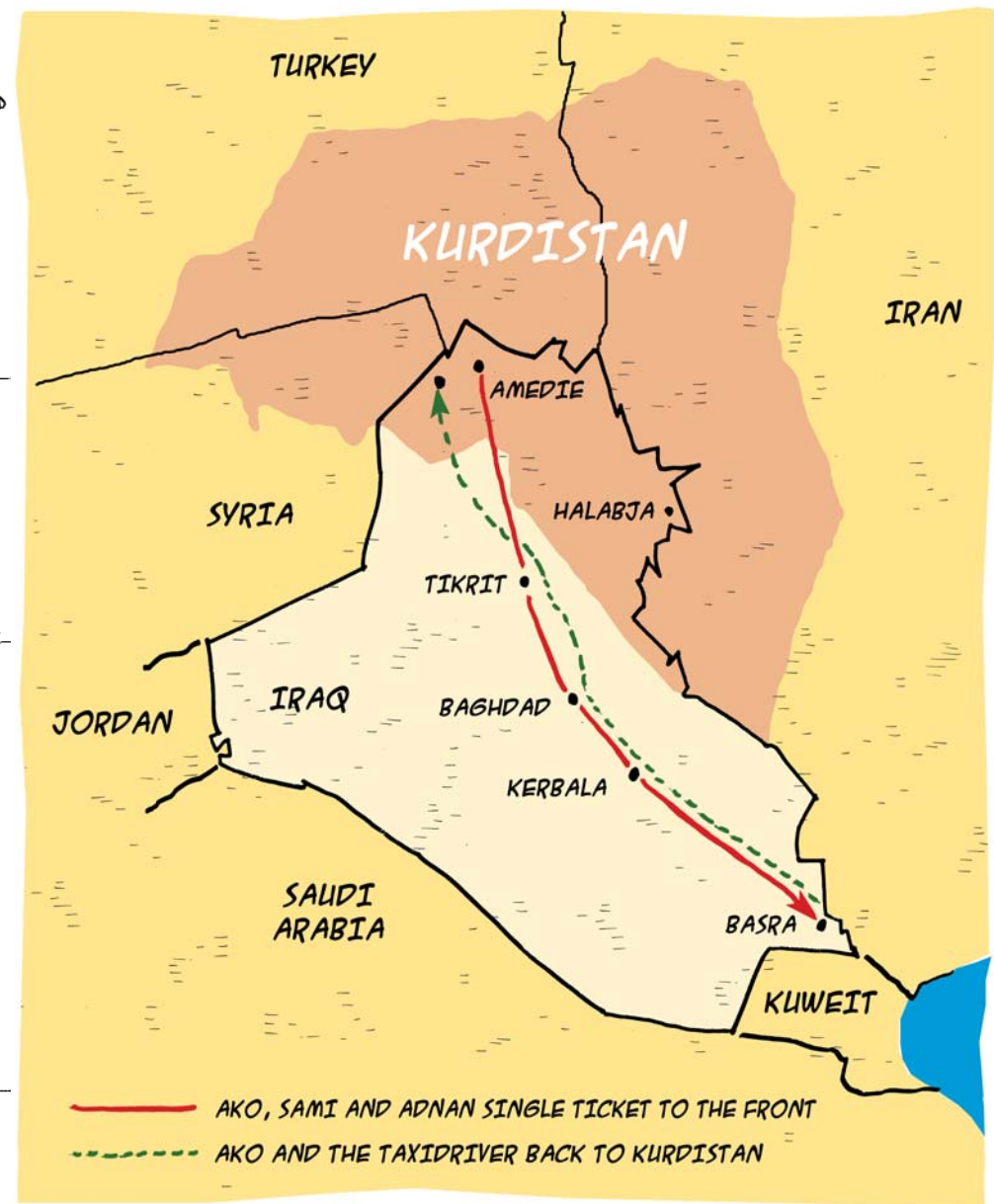
1988 February - September. The period known as the Anfal Campaign, a reference to the eighth sura of the Koran which declares legitimate the use of violence and cruelty against infidels. Ali Hassan Al Mahjid, Saddam Hussein's cousin and known as «Chemical Ali», is given full power. The efforts of intensive Arabization and evacuation having not been sufficient in annihilating the Kurdish population, Chemical Ali turns to a more radical solution. Chemical warfare is used against the Kurdish population, and deemed legitimate by the Anfal Campaign.

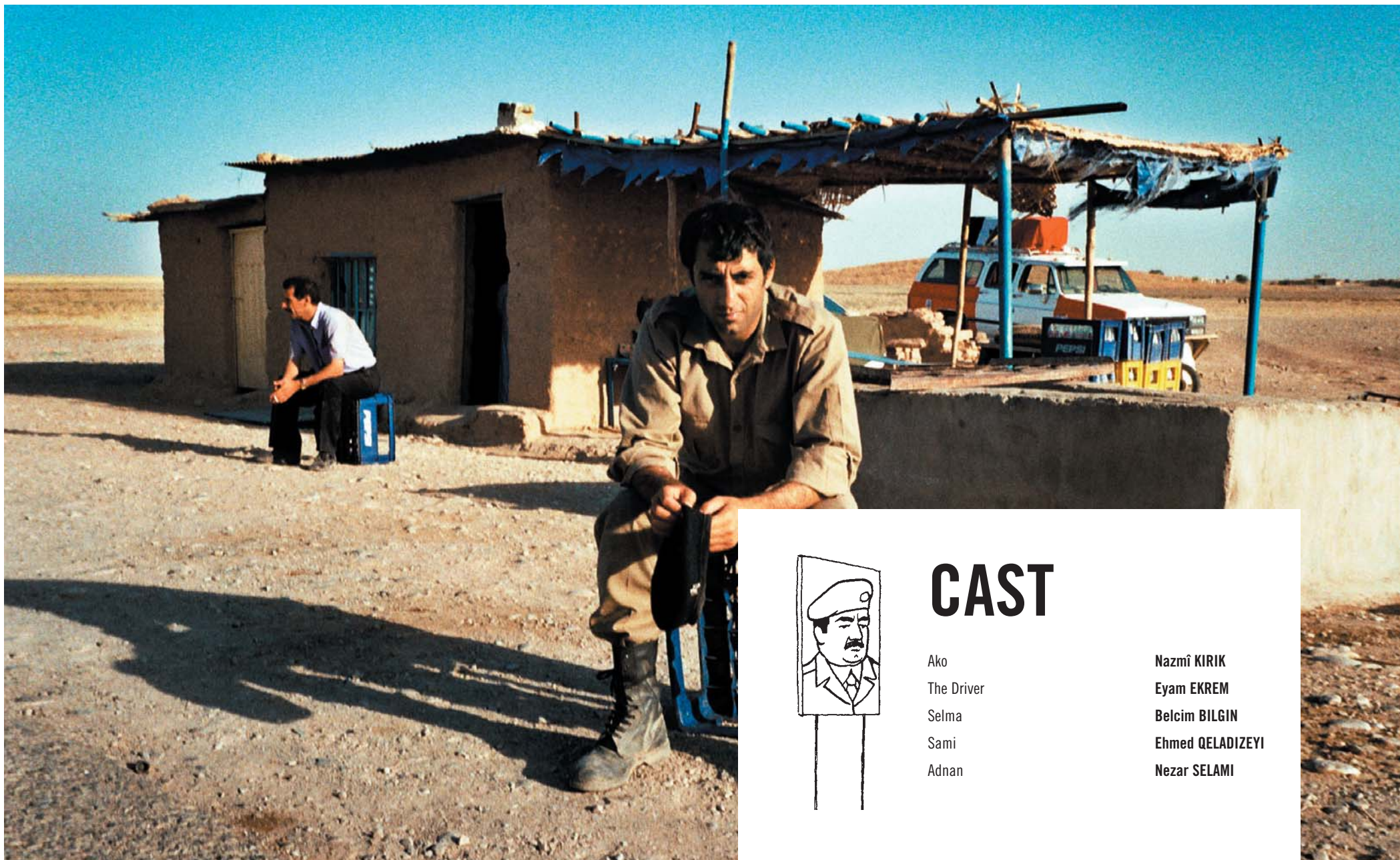
1988 March 16th. The Halabja Massacre. A symbolic date for the Kurdish people. Iraqi forces proceed with chemical warfare on the small Kurdish village of Halabja. 5000 dead.

2003. On April 9, Saddam Hussein and his regime were toppled.

«I will kill them all with chemical warfare! Who will say anything? The international community? To hell with them!»

Ali Hassan Al Majid, February 1988





CAST

Ako
The Driver
Selma
Sami
Adnan

Nazmî KIRIK
Eyam EKREM
Belcim BILGIN
Ehmed QELADIZEYI
Nezar SELAMI

CREW

Writer & Director
Director of Photography
Set Designer
Sound Designer
Editor
Composers
Producers

Production

Associate Producer

With the support of **REGIONAL GOVERNMENT OF KURDISH IRAQ**

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TV5 WORLD, YLE (Finland), **KURDISTAN TV**

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French Distribution

French Release

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