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FILM
Filmmakers Look to Change Italy's Treatment of Migrants

By ELISABETTA POVOLEDO
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ROME — Because it is real, the video is all the more touching. Because it was taken with a mobile phone, the images are jumpy and all-over-the-place, but it's unlikely that a professionally shot movie would have captured the spontaneity of the joy — and relief — of the boatload of mostly Eritrean migrants rescued by the Italian navy in the Mediterranean after a harrowing four-day crossing from Libya. (The video can be found on [YouTube](#).) The excitement of the migrants is palpable at the prospect that they would soon be taken to Italy.

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Simone Falso/ZaLab

Semere, an Eritrean man whose story forms the heart of Andrea Segre and Stefano Liberti's documentary "Mare Chiuso" (Closed Sea).

But this story has no happy ending; the Africans' joy was short-lived.

Instead of escorting the rubber dinghy teeming with refugees to the safety of the Italian coast, Italian navy officials returned the boatload to Libya, and the migrants were sent to detention camps where some were mistreated.

The dramatic at-sea video is the centerpiece of an Italian documentary, "Mare Chiuso," (Closed Sea), which opened in Italy last month and follows the migrants as they are rejected and returned to Libya. In the film, one of the migrants recalls how he felt when he found out that he was being sent back. "Thank you, Italians," he says, his voice breaking with bitterness. "We love Italy and all Italians. But thank you."

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From left: Mr. Segre; Matteo Calore, the director of photography; and Mr. Liberti, during the filming of "Mare Chiuso."

The documentary opened modestly, in four movie theaters nationwide, but demand has been high among rights organizations and cineclubs: it has been booked for more than 100 screenings in the next three months. And while no foreign release is planned yet, praise has been high in the festivals where it has already shown.

It chronicles a contentious moment in recent Italian history, the spring and summer of 2009, when an estimated 1,000 migrants attempting to reach Italy by sea were intercepted and sent back to Libya, a strategy agreed by the governments at the time, led by Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi.

"This was a very ugly page in Italian immigration history," said Laura Boldrini, a spokeswoman in Italy for the United Nations refugee agency, which has endorsed "Mare Chiuso." "We hope that the documentary will impact how countries will deal with future rescues at sea."

The film's directors, the documentary filmmaker Andrea Segre and the journalist Stefano Liberti, have worked on several projects together since their first collaboration, "South of Lampedusa," which they filmed in Niger in 2006, and they said that affecting how public opinion understands immigration related issues has become central to their work.

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Roman Amore and Omer Ibrahim, two of the migrants who agreed to appear in Mr. Segre and Mr. Liberti's documentary.

One way to “right an injustice” is by recounting it, said Mr. Segre on a recent afternoon in Milan where “Mare Chiuso” won two prizes — one given to films that fight racism, the other chosen by second generation

immigrants to Italy — at the African, Asian and Latin American Film Festival.

Mr. Segre’s previous documentaries all had tough stories to tell. “Green Blood” (2010) exposed the exploitation of African laborers in the fields of Calabria in Southern Italy; “Like a Man on Earth” (2008), which he worked on with Mr. Liberti, denounced the harsh conditions of African migrants in Libyan detention camps.

The two men met in Niger when working on a project for two non-governmental organizations tracking migration routes. Mr. Segre was sent as a documentary filmmaker, Mr. Liberti as a journalist. The meeting resulted in the documentary “South of Lampedusa,” which also became the title of Mr. Liberti’s book about African migration.

Both had long been interested in migration issues. Mr. Liberti covered the topic as a reporter, while Mr. Segre traveled widely, from Eastern Europe to Africa, to understand what led people to try to emigrate to “fortress Europe,” he said.

“In general, we both track migration questions, sometimes together, sometimes alone and often we cross paths,” Mr. Liberti said.

With “Mare Chiuso,” the directors wanted to shed light on the cruel consequences of Italy’s “push-back” practices.

The opportunity to meet with migrants presented itself after the outbreak of the Libyan war in March 2011, when many African migrants escaped the Libyan detention camps where they had been forcibly held. Some crossed the border with Tunisia, and in June Mr. Segre and Mr. Liberti traveled to the Shousha refugee camp there to hear their stories.

While looking more widely at the topic of immigration, the documentary’s narrative centers on the tale of Semere, an Eritrean man whose wife, Tsige, at the time nine months pregnant, made it safely to Italy, while he was on another boat that was halted at sea and sent back. It was Semere who shot the cellphone video at the heart of the documentary; a computer expert by training, he was attempting to flee his country where military reserve duties can last indefinitely.

The film follows the story of desperation and mistreatment upon his return to Libya and the rare moments of joy when he speaks to his wife and his daughter, Nahere, born in Italy, 10 days after her mother landed. The couple reunited, on camera, on Aug. 8, 2011, more than two years after they parted.

Mr. Liberti underlined that the film would not have been possible without the help of the protagonists, who allowed the filmmakers to capture very intimate aspects of their lives. “It wasn’t just a question of personal justice,” he said. “Because they didn’t want this to happen again, they agreed to become the spokespeople for collective injustice.”

In some cases, it does look as though Mr. Segre and Mr. Liberti’s documentaries are having an effect. While they were filming in Tunisia last summer, the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, France, began hearing a case involving 24 Somalis and Eritreans who were forcibly returned to Libya in May 2009. The migrants sued Italy for violation of the European Convention on Human Rights; in February the court ruled in their favor, condemning Italy to pay each plaintiff €15,000, or about \$20,000. Lawyers for the migrants showed clips from the filmmakers’ 2008 documentary “Like a Man on Earth,” to demonstrate that Italy had sent the Africans back to face horrific conditions.

“Mare Chiuso” includes the session of the European Court during which the landmark ruling was reached, and also shows the reaction of the migrants who had congregated in the Rome office of their lawyers to await the decision. There are loud whoops and cheers when a telephone call from Strasbourg comes through.

The Italian government has acknowledged the European court ruling, but so far it has not formally addressed the issue of the mass migration that is likely to commence again now that the weather has turned warmer. Mr. Liberti said the premiere of documentary