

# Heart of Fire



TV6<sup>0</sup>Film and BurkertBareiss

in cooperation with Beta CINEMA

present

## Heart of Fire (WT)



- Directed by: Luigi Falorni (Oscar Nominee Best Documentary:  
"The Story of The Weeping Camel")
- Produced by: Sven Burgemeister (Oscar Nominee Best Foreign Language  
Film: "Sophie Scholl – The Final Days")  
Andreas Bareiss / Gloria Burkert (Oscar Winner Best Foreign  
Language Film: "Nowhere in Africa")
- Budget: 5,5 Mio USD
- Status: Pre-production
- Shooting: July 2007, 2/3 months, Kenya
- Completion 2008

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**A true story, based on Senait Mehari's international bestseller**

## Short Synopsis

Given away by her father to the Eritrean liberation front, sharp-witted little Senait lives through the horrors of a guerrilla war and challenges the leader's authority with her risky decision never to kill.

## The Story

Senait is born the daughter of an Ethiopian woman and an Eritrean man – a bad combination in 1974, in the middle of a long liberation war between those two peoples. Asmara is under Ethiopian occupation, and Senait's father takes to the woods with the Eritrean freedom fighters. Left alone and needy, Senait's mother attempts to kill her baby, locking it away in a suitcase.

Senait survives, only to land after six years of orphanage back in the hands of her father, a despotic person who frequently uses violence to "educate" his many children. A spunky and rebellious little rascal, Senait is poison for his temper. So as the ongoing war makes food scarce, her father decides to get rid of her: he hands Senait and her elder stepsister over to the "Morning Stars" - a children's unit within the Eritrean Liberation Front.

It's here that Senait finds a new family and a mother substitute in the commander Agawegahta: a beautiful and charismatic young woman who has made her way to one of the leading positions, typically occupied by men. Senait falls for her, and tries anything to catch her attention and win her favour. She endures paramilitary training and the harshness of guerrilla life in the dry Eritrean desert, waiting for the moment she'll fight at the commander's side.

But then Senait encounters the first dead bodies: enemies and comrades lying side by side. In her eyes, the dead friends and foes all look shockingly alike - children like her. So when Agawegahta gives her the long-desired Kalashnikov, Senait shirks the drill and pretends to shoot, but with an empty magazine; she even buries her gun. She gets punished, mocked as a coward and isolated. But her refusal to kill and her naïve questioning set a troublesome precedent - a challenge to Agawegahta's authority.

Meanwhile losses increase and the enemy tightens the circle. A few of Senait's comrades are caught while fleeing and are killed at Agawegahta's command. In a final clash with the enemy, the commander calls her fighters to the last sacrifice. But Senait takes control of her destiny this time. She confronts Agawegahta and finally leaves her former idol to her fate. While the troop is breaking apart, Senait is able to save herself and her stepsister - hiding in an abandoned suitcase...

Senait Mehari lives today in Berlin, where she's pursuing a career as a pop singer. In the three years she spent in the liberation army, she never killed.

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## Director and Screenwriter

### Luigi Falorni

Luigi Falorni was born in 1971 in Florence/Italy. He attended the film directing class of the Cooperativa Schermobianco in Florence in 1991/92, graduating with the feature "La Gabbia di Gesso" (1992). He then studied at the Academy of Television & Film (HFF/M) in Munich, where he directed and photographed several award-winning documentaries and short features, and graduated with the Oscar-nominated documentary feature "The Story of the Weeping Camel" (2003). He now lives in Berlin, where he works as freelance director and screenwriter.

## Director's Note

"The Child is father of the Man"  
(William Wordsworth)

Senait's story fascinates me in ever-new ways. At age seven she had already seen and experienced things that most grown-ups in our world can't even imagine. Considering her troubled childhood, she was the perfect candidate to become a child killer, like many of her young comrades. Exposed to peer pressure and to the influence of her charismatic leader, a mother substitute for her, her objection to killing certainly wasn't inspired from the outside.

Something must have clicked inside her young conscience. When, how – this is what I'm interested in investigating in this film. How is a conscience born? How does a seven-year-old child - who had learned to avoid trouble since she was born and to care only for her own survival - come to distinguish right from wrong and to take a clear stand despite the inherent dangers. Also, what can we grown-ups learn from it? In a similar way to Andersen's "The Emperor's New Clothes", Senait's story tells us the universal tale about the unsettling and awakening impact that a child's ingeniousness and sincerity can have on the adult world.

## Visual Concept

The visual narrative is intended to be intimately linked to the protagonist's perspective - camera and audience will stay close to Senait and witness the events as seen through her eyes. Simple imagery and easy-to-read, poignant pictures will reflect a child's way of exploring the world, and establish a contrast to the harshness of the story.

The film crew will be held reasonably small and flexible, in order to capture spontaneous scenes with child actors. Great care will be given to present war in a subtle way. Violence and the sense of threat will be suggested and evoked rather than directly shown.

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The haunting beauty of Eritrean landscapes will be welcome in the picture when a contrast to the closeness of the story is needed. Otherwise, the postcard esthetics of epic African movies will be avoided. Instead, the camera will establish an intimacy with the protagonists' faces and subtle expressions, and pay attention to the materiality and sensual appeal of objects - sweaty skin, dusty stones and dirty sand, the bristly vegetation, the visible signs of dryness and heat.

The first part (suitcase episode, orphanage, father's barrack) will be characterized by the narrowness and darkness of the spaces where Senait lives. The characters around her (her mother, the nursing-sister, her father) will be prevalently shown from the back or in semi-darkness, their presence will have an elusive, out-of-reach quality.

The second part plays in the vastness of Gash Barka, Eritrea's lowland. Here it's impossible to hide, and the characters around Senait stand out in the landscape with a much more vivid presence. They seem to jump at her face and most encounters actually end up in a clash.

## Background Information

### The Numbers

22 million children and youths are currently on the run in Africa, Latin America, Asia and Eastern Europe. They flee so that they do not have to go to war, kill or be killed.

300,000 children and youths under 18 are fighting all over the world in government armies, militias or troops run by local warlords. 120,000 child soldiers are fighting in Africa alone. Particularly hard hit are Rwanda, Angola, Congo, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Two million children died in action between 1986 and 1997, six million were wounded and many crippled for life.

### Why Children?

Children who fight in wars are an "achievement" of the most recent past. Before the invention of gunpowder, children would not have had a chance against adult warriors in a battle with swords or with bows and arrows. The kick of old-fashioned firearms would also have been too powerful for a child. It is not until the advent of the considerably kick-reduced American M-16 or the Russian AK-47, better known as the "Kalashnikov," that an untrained, undernourished young girl could be used as a lethal weapon.

Children rarely question commands and are easy to manipulate. They have no rights and no one to speak up for them. They eat less than adults, are smaller and less visible in the fight. And they are easy to replace: thanks to high birth rates, every second person in Africa and Southeast Asia is under 18.

## **Eritrea – The history of an embattled land**

### **The Longest War**

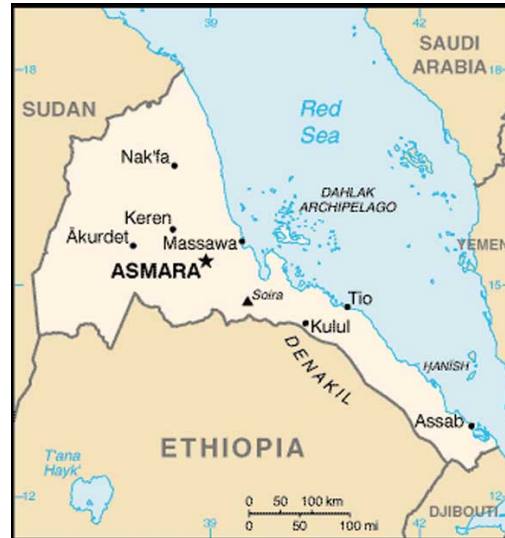
The Horn of Africa was considered the "Land of the Gods" in 2900 B.C. One dealt with gold, incense, ebony, ivory and slaves. The mighty kingdom of Aksum, on which the pride of every Eritrean is based, lay in the territory of present-day Eritrea. This pride is still unbroken, although the Eritreans are practically destitute after a 30-year-long war of liberation from Ethiopia (1961 to 1991), which not only had a much larger army, but was also heavily supported first by the Americans and then by the Russians. Winning their independence was all the more amazing as the Eritrean liberation troops were also fighting among themselves. One of these groups was the ELF (Eritrean Liberation Front) or "Jebha" (Arabic for "front") which was founded in Cairo in 1960 and was Islam-oriented. It is under their banner that Senait went to war. In the 1980s this grouping was defeated by the strongly socialist-revolutionary EPLF (Eritrean People's Liberation Front), the "Shabia" (Arabic for "people"), out of which the present-day government of Eritrea under President Isais Afwerki emerged.

### **Eritrea Today**

After the end of the fighting in 1991 and a subsequent bloody border war against their unloved neighbor for a piece of desert (1998 to 2000), Eritrea is still economically struggling. Many displaced persons are just now returning to their traditional settlement areas, which are often still riddled with landmines. Humanitarian organizations estimate that about 60 percent of the population is needy and can only survive through food supplies from abroad. This situation has been exacerbated by a dry period that has been lasting for several years now and has led to widespread losses of crops. Tribal hierarchies and the adherence to traditional customs are the source of a rich culture, but also a major hindrance to development.

Eritrea calls itself a democracy, but with only one licensed party, a state-controlled press, an insufficient separation of powers and without free elections, this designation may seem inadequate to Western observers.

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## Production Team

**Sven Burgemeister** – *Producer* (TV60Film)

Sven Burgemeister, a member of the German and the European Film Academy, has produced several Feature Films since 1993. Besides Academy Award Nominee and European Film Award Nominee “Sophie Scholl – The Finals Days” (2004) he produced feature films like “When The Light Comes” (1998), “Hope Dies Last” (2001), “Soloalbum” (2003) and “Whoetrain” (2006).

He was honored with several German TV and film awards. The company TV60Film owned by Bernd and Sven Burgemeister can look back on a long tradition of national and international productions and coproductions like “Anne of Green Gables”, “Jack Holborn”, “Smiley People”, “Mino”, “Fantomax” and many others. TV60Film and BurkertBareiss Development have been working in close collaboration for two years now and have already produced eight films together.

**Andreas Bareiss/Gloria Burkert** – *Producer* (BurkertBareiss)

Gloria Burkert and Andreas Bareiss, both based in Munich, teamed up in 1994. Since then BurkertBareiss developed and produced more than 50 television and feature films, among them such outstanding productions as “A Map of the Heart” (by Dominik Graf) or “Nowhere in Africa” (by Caroline Link). Their films have won all important German film and television awards. Together with their former partner Peter Herrmann, BurkertBareiss received the Oscar for “Best foreign-language film” for “Nowhere in Africa” in 2002.

## International Sales - Beta Cinema

Beta Cinema is the theatrical division of Beta Film. Launched in 2001, Beta Cinema has established itself as a "boutique operation" for independent feature films with strong theatrical potential. Beta Cinema's philosophy is to keep its selective acquisition policy of 5 to 10 titles per year in order to fully develop the theatrical potential of each title according to its individual character. After the outstanding success of German



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productions such as the Toronto 2005 Gala entry "**The White Masai**", the Oscar-nominated nominated "**Downfall**" (2005), or the Berlin 2005 competition entry "**One day in Europe**", Beta Cinema will continue to pick the most promising German films as well as to offer its services and expertise to international producers looking for individual handling of their productions.

Beta Cinema's strength lies in its focus on a carefully selected line-up and development of individual sales strategies with the perfect mix of marketing and festival platforms. Beta Cinema is the alternative address for established and up-and-coming independent producers looking for individual international handling of their projects.