

PROACTION FILM AND VENTANA FILMS PRESENT

# RETURN TO HOMS

WINNER  
2014 WORLD CINEMA GRAND  
JURY PRIZE: DOCUMENTARY  
**sundance**  
film festival



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## LOGLINE

A look behind the barricades of the besieged city of Homs, where for nineteen-year-old Basset and his ragtag group of comrades, the audacious hope of revolution is crumbling like the buildings around them.

## SYNOPSIS

"This is Homs, but I don't know where I am," Basset says with characteristic joviality as he wanders among the ruins and through the rubble-filled streets of the city. These are the streets in which he and Osama grew up: now a barren battlefield. In fractured homes, deserted living rooms speak of thousands of disrupted lives. Osama is disorientated by this completely new reality, "like an immigrant discovering a new city".

As the siege takes hold in Homs, these two friends gather together a circle of brave but inexperienced insurgents, determined to protect the captive civilians and help to get them out of the city. Surviving on a diet of just a few olives and a single glass of dirty water a day, this handful of stranded amateur fighters hold out against the snipers, tanks and mortars of the Syrian Army. They scuttle through the ghost town like rats: resourceful and single-minded.

An unlikely leader of the rebellion, Basset's protest songs and dark sense of humour reflect his dream of liberation from Assad's oppressive regime. But soon bravado gives way to despair as the reality of their David and Goliath battle sinks in. Sitting in a destroyed hallway lit by streaks of sunlight that make their way through the debris, the normally optimistic Basset seems broken. Osama has been captured and the fight is not going well. "I no longer have it in me to do this. All my close friends are gone. I'm fed up, man."

Out of despair, however, grows a renewed, more bitter determination. "Will this revolution ever end?" the film's director, Talal Derki, asks. "Sure - they're not immortal", smiles Basset. Pushed out of the city by advancing government forces, he prepares his men for a dangerous return to Homs. "Kill me, but just open up an exit for the people."

Primal and visceral, this extraordinary film dives into the reality of the Syrian resistance with a frenzied immediacy. Through a remarkable intimacy it captures the dreaded rite of passage of two friends and a haunting battle cry for justice.

## **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

The movie is about the Syrian citizen who challenged everything and everyone to demand freedom. It's a movie about war and the pressure of being in a battlefield.

When I got to Homs and met Abdul Basset al-Saroot, I was inspired immediately. I knew it: he was the personality that I had been looking for, a courageous 19-year-old man, full of character and charisma. He could bring the people closer to him in a second, and everyone loved him and appreciated his energy.

Abdul Basset always uses his emotions. He used to do so in soccer... he became a famous goalkeeper... and he did the same in the revolution. In the first protests in Homs, Saroot climbed the other guys' shoulders, took his shirt off, and started chanting, "Hey hey sniper, here's my neck and my head." His message: I am Abdul Basset al-Saroot, I don't hide my face, I use my full name, and I am here and against the Syrian regime.

What started as peaceful protests in Syria soon evolved into siege in Homs, into the battles and violence around the country, where snipers shot citizens and the regime shelled places killing innocent souls. That's when Saroot started carrying weapons.

The character of Ossama in the movie represents the eyes of the viewer. Ossama's camera represents the fictional presence of the viewer in Homs. I wanted to highlight his role as a videographer. We focused on Saroot and Osama's characters.

The filming was continuous: even when Saroot and his group were stuck they were being filmed using zoom lenses, a process that lasted for 15 days until they managed to dig a tunnel and return to Khalidiyyeh. So the scenes in the movie shocked many people – the shelling, the death of a fighter who was alive few seconds ago.

The crisis changed each and every one of us. The challenges changed us, but mostly it was death. Death left its mark in every one of us: we all changed because of the increasing violence, the loss of people close to us, the injustice, the fragmentation. However, Abdul Basset was strong and very solid; he was and still is persistent.

Talal Derki



## MAKING THE FILM

“Although we liked the idea of the two protagonists, there was no dramatic arc at first. We weren't sure if we had enough for a longer film, but we decided to take the risk,” says producer Orwa Nyrabia. Events overtook the production. By late summer of 2011, the early, heady days of the pro-democracy protests were sliding into full-scale violence as Syrian army forces entered Homs and fighting broke out. “We never expected that, a few months into shooting, Basset would become a militia fighter and that Ossama would be detained. The harsh reality carved the film’s dramaturgy. One wishes that the reality would have been less dramatic and that we could have lost the film. It’s very painful.”



## CREW



### **TALAL DERKI**

Before the revolution, I was practicing my trade, which I learned years ago before the revolution. I studied filmmaking and directing in Greece. I started thinking of filming something for Syria. Orwa and I had that dream since day one, and then the revolution started and we decided to pursue the dream, as risky as it may be. It was all a challenge, going to Homs was a challenge, but we made it happen as a team.



### **HANS ROBERT EISENHAUER**

As commissioning editor for ZDF/ARTE, and Deputy Programme Director for ARTE, Hans Robert's more than 50 theatrical length commissions for TV and Cinema include Oscar winners. Hans Robert has been director of the Berlin Film Fund and helped to create the European Film Academy. After his retirement from ZDF/ARTE Hans Robert runs a film-and TV-production company in Berlin Ventana-Film GmbH, focused on international documentaries.



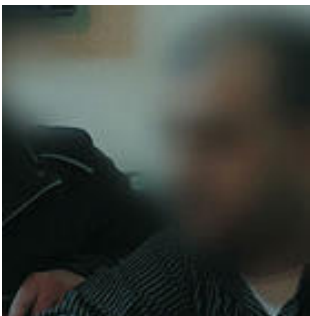
### **ORWA NYRABIA**

Orwa Nyrabia graduated from the Higher Institute of Dramatic Arts in Damascus. He worked as Assistant Director in high-profile fiction films. Since he co-founded PROACTION FILM, Orwa has worked on a number of documentary and fiction films. As a filmmaker, Orwa has made one short documentary, co-directed a fiction short and finished his feature-length doc "Queen of Hearts". Orwa is a co-founder of DOX BOX International Documentary Film Festival in Syria.



### **KAHTAN HASSOUN**

Kahtan started working as cameraman only by the beginning of the revolution, he used to work in printing services before 2011. He was one of the remarkable activists of his neighbourhoods, the film's location, Al Khalidiya, and a close friend of Basset. Since mid-2012, Derki and Nyrabia could not go to Homs anymore, and he became the film's main cameraman, doing great work of courage and talent, and leaving an unforgettable document from the actual front-line.



### **OSSAMA AL HOMSI**

Nyrabia and Al Homsy shot the first part of the film. Nyrabia then fled Syria after being detained and released by security forces in September 2012. Al Homsy disappeared around the same time after being picked up along the Syrian-Lebanese border. "The whereabouts of Ossama are still unknown," says Nyrabia. "We don't know whether he is alive. He was against arming the revolution, but in the eyes of the regime an activist holding a camera is worse than one holding a weapon."



### **DIANA EL JEIROUDI**

Syrian filmmaker and producer, and co-founder of Proaction Film and DOX BOX. Her previous work included "Dolls, A Woman From Damascus" (2008, IDFA), which was screened in more than 40 countries internationally and sold to broadcasters around the world. In 2011, El Jeiroudi initiated the project "Baladi", inviting Syrian filmmakers to make films despite all that was happening and maximising the measures of safety for them, was the original umbrella under which "Return To Homs" started.



# IN THE PRESS

## NEW YORK TIMES

"Like its heroes, we are pulled into the conflict with frenzied immediacy as we experience one city, the dreaded rites of passage of two friends, and ultimately an entire nation torn apart by the fog of war"

## VOICE OF AMERICA

"...puts a human face on the ongoing violence in Syria."

## THE HUFFINGTON POST

"...gives the world a gut-wrenching glimpse into life in the isolated city."

## INDIEWIRE

"Portrays the struggle from the inside, from about as far from the filter of mainstream media as one can get, capturing tense shootouts and the extremes of revolutionary spirit in unnerving detail"

## WORLD POLICY

"...one of the most remarkable films I have ever seen. See it if you have the chance."

## THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

"Derki sees himself as both media-activist and revolutionary, harnessing 21st-century social media to unite, strengthen and publicize the rebel forces. Explicitly constructed as an urgent appeal for international intervention ("O world, what are you waiting for" goes one of the rebels' many songs), Return To Homs consciously follows in the footsteps of such fictional classics as Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* (1966). Learning much from such predecessors and sensibly dispensing with any extraneous musical score, Derki and his experienced editor Anne Fabini have crafted a sober, sobering bulletin of unambiguous intention and undeniable power."

## SLANT MAGAZINE

"Talal Derki's *Return to Homs* is a testament to the power of video to document resistance to corrupt and abusive regimes—in this case, that of Syria's Bashar al-Assad. It's also a witness to the limits of that power."

## THE GUARDIAN

"Shot over two years in the city dubbed "the capital of the revolution", Talal Derki's harsh, jolting documentary traces the protesters' journey from pacifism to violence and finally towards martyrdom, the only ending they can envisage once the conflict turns against them. The director's relentless, claustrophobic approach is surely an accurate reflection of the tragedy itself. There is no wider picture; the world has largely turned its back."

## VARIETY

"...a remarkable achievement in immersive conflict-zone filmmaking, fearlessly taking us to the front lines of the Syrian civil war. Here, no one is safe, and we fear for Saroot's safety, especially as his remaining friends and relatives fall, making the young man increasingly obsessed with martyrdom. This consequences-centric approach underscores the demoralizing senselessness of the violence and the futility of such a mismatched insurgency, where the rebels' only hope is that the outside world will intervene on their behalf."



# INTERVIEW EXTRACTS

ORWA NYRABIA IN  
**THE WASHINGTON POST**

Bitterly contested Homs has been called “the capital of the Syrian revolution,” but Nyrabia was initially skeptical when director Talal Derki proposed making “The Return to Homs.” A Kurd who then lived in Damascus, Derki admitted to Nyrabia that he didn’t exactly know Homs well.

“He said, ‘No, I’ve never been to the city, but it looks great on television.’”

“I told him then, ‘It’s the most stupid idea I could think of. I don’t see how you could make a film in Homs. It’s not your place. You don’t know it.’”

“So he told me he was going to Qamishli, where his family comes from. He went to Homs and returned with five minutes, presenting Basset and Ossama,” another major character in the movie. (Ossama, who also photographed some of the movie, is now missing and probably being held by the government.)

“He totally cheated me! I was laughing a lot, and told him, ‘You totally got me. I can’t tell you not to go to Homs anymore.’”

For the first year of shooting, Nyrabia traveled with Derki to Homs, serving as the documentary’s cinematographer. “We used to dismantle the camera into 14, 15 small pieces and hide it in the car’s chassis. We’d drive to Homs, protected by my mother sitting in the front seat so the checkpoint guys would be a little embarrassed to be too bad.”

“And then,” he adds, “it took us two hours to dismantle the car to get out the camera pieces and put it together.”

**“What’s natural to cinema, in my opinion, is that it can bypass prejudice and help people identify,” he says. “I think it’s probably only film that can tell people that, ‘You could be there. And you could have similar choices, under similar conditions. You can even be inspired by those people you’re only scared of when you’re watching the news.’”**

TALAL DERKI IN  
**NOW.**

NOW: Why did you choose Saroot? Can you tell us more about him?

Derki: I remember the protests clearly. Saroot's spirit distracted us from filming many times; we left our cameras aside and participated in the protests. It was beyond motivating.

He's from al-Bayyada/Homs and comes from Bedouin roots. He is 19 and never attended university; instead, he used to help his father in his forging business. His father discovered Abdul Basset's talent in soccer, and after that, he started playing with the Karama team. Gradually he became a famous goalkeeper and was granted many awards. He tells me that he just wants the revolution to succeed so he can return to his normal life after. Physically, he can't play soccer or any other sports anymore because of several injuries. Moreover, Homs is under siege, and he's getting half of what his body needs to survive and function. The situation is beyond sad.

Moreover, Homs is under siege, and he's getting half of what his body needs to survive and function. The situation is beyond sad.

We deeply hope for [Saroot and his fellow activists] to be safe and stay safe because without [Saroot] and the rest of them, there will be chaos. Abdul Basset describes himself as very emotive – he always uses his emotions. He used to do so in soccer, and he did the same in the revolution. In the first protests in Homs, Saroot climbed the other guys' shoulders, took his shirt off, and started chanting, "Hey hey sniper,

here's my neck and my head." It was sort of a challenge, his message: I am Abdul Basset al-Saroot, I don't hide my face, I use my full name, and I am here and against the Syrian regime. The challenge he gave, how brave he was, how he introduced new ways of protesting like the dancing circles that used to happen during the protests of Homs – he managed to bring some elements of soccer culture into the protests.

NOW: On a personal level, how did this experience change you?

Derki: Artistically, it changed a lot in me. The filmmaker must live within the movie he is making, and he must be present there no matter what to convey the right feelings within his work.

The filmmaker should be a part of the experience, and must experience all of the details. He must be a part of the movie and the unforeseeable [developments], and he always must have solutions.

On a humanitarian level, I consider the movie an experience of life more than a [mere] film. It is a good thing that we got to experience these events, and I consider myself lucky for having been a part of the change.

The Syrian revolution is a phenomenon that might not happen again for a hundred years. However, I would say that the lucky ones are the next generations, the generations who will get to live in a better Syria.

## RETURN TO HOMS BLOG

FOR UP-TO-DATE NEWS AND VIEWS ABOUT THE FILM

<http://www.returntohoms.com/#!blog/c13wb>



# AWARDS





# CREDITS

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**TALAL DERKI**

**ORWA NYRABIA**

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WITH THE SUPPORT OF           **AFAC**  
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**NORWEGIAN MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS**  
**GOETHE INSTITUTE**  
**ZERO PRODUCTIONS**

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