



GFM Film Productions Direct Activity Company

A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU

Production Notes

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GFM Film Productions Direct Activity Company

BE THE VOICE. NOT THE VICTIM.

a
girl
from
mogadishu

A FILM BY MARY MCGUCKIAN



BASED ON THE INCREDIBLE TRUE STORY

HEAD GEAR FILMS & METROL TECHNOLOGY PRESENT A PEMBRIDGE PICTURE ASSOCIATES A PREMIERE PICTURE THE EXCHANGE & UFUNDE A MEDIA PRODUCTION WITH SCREEN BRUSSELS WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE WOMANITY FOUNDATION
IN ASSOCIATION WITH BORD CADRE FILMS WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF BRUSSELS-CAPITAL REGION PRODUCED BY ASSOCIATION WITH EFIS EUROPEAN / SCREEN IRELAND/AMINA HADIM LONG BARKHAD ABDI "A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU" WRITTEN BY MARY MCGUCKIAN
BASED ON THE TESTIMONY OF FRAH AHMED MARTHA CANGA ANTONIO MARIAM MURSAI ZOLA BRADY LIKE SPENKER BRIBERTS STANLEY TOWNSEND EDITED BY SEAMUS MURPHY ORIGINAL SCORE BY NITIN SAWHNEY COSTUME DESIGNER NATHALIE LERORGNE
PRODUCTION DESIGNER EMMA PUCCI CINEMATOGRAPHY MICHAEL LAVELLE I.S.C. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS PETER BEVAN JASMIN KOPAR GILLES WATERKEYN TOM HARBERD PHIL HUNT COMPTON ROSS EMMA DEANLAND CAROLINE KEELING
VICTORIA OBERFELD ANASTASIA GARRETT JASON GARRETT NADIA KHAMUKHA BRUCE WESS AMBER WILLIAMS LOYD WILLIAMS DAN WEHSLER YANN BROSSTEDT JASMIN ZEINAL ZADE CARAN MCGUCKIAN BRIAN O'SHEA DAVID ROGERS
ASSISTANT PRODUCERS SANA EL MULLI TERRY MCCLYNN NOURA SAYRAF PRODUCED BY ADRIAM POLITOWSKI WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY MARY MCGUCKIAN

A Girl from Mogadishu

SYNOPSIS'S

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Tag Line

'Be the voice, not the victim'
Ifrah Ahmed

Log Line

Ifrah Ahmed, trafficked from war-torn Somalia to Ireland, turns her traumatic childhood testimony into a force for good, emerging as one of the world's foremost global activists against FGM/C.

Short Synopsis

'Be the voice, not the victim'
Ifrah Ahmed

'A Girl from Mogadishu' is based on the testimony of Ifrah Ahmed.

Fleeing war-torn Somalia in 2006, she is trafficked to Ireland where as an asylum-seeking refugee, she undergoes a traumatic medical examination which reveals the extent of her mutilation as a child.

Traumatized by the memory, she turns her experiences into a force for good, emerging as one of the world's most foremost global activists against Female Genital Mutilation.

'Silence may be the rust on the razor that threatened to cut my throat,
but it was not my tongue they cut.'

Medium Synopsis

Circumcised at eight. Raped by wandering militiamen at twelve. Fully infibulated again at thirteen, and then married off to a fifty-year-old man who regularly beat her; Ifrah Ahmed runs away to a place she had once known as home in war torn Mogadishu to find it had become the kind of battleground now known as 'Black Hawk Down'.

Ifrah makes the extraordinary journey out of war-torn Somalia and arrives not in Minnesota, USA, as she had been lead to believe, but Dublin, Ireland.

Finally finding some sense of safety, her fears begin to subside and her traumatic days, she thinks, are behind her, until a routine medical smear test elicits such looks of horror on the faces of her Irish doctors that she suffers a profound sense of shame.

They say that anger is the flip side of shame. Channelling the feelings on both sides of that coin, she reacts incredibly quickly, learns English at break-neck speed and unearths an enviable technical talent for harnessing social media.

Within months she is campaigning for better conditions for asylum - seekers arriving in Ireland. She quickly becomes a leading activist against gender-based violence and fights through her campaign work for the abandonment of FGM world-wide.

As an Irish citizen, she presents her testimony on behalf of Ireland's MEPs on the occasion of the ratification of the UN Convention against FGM/C at the European Parliament and it is passed unanimously.

Thus commences her now lauded professional career as an international activist.

Long Synopsis

'My name is Ifrah Ahmed, I am an Irish Citizen and a survivor of FGM'... This is how the Girl from Mogadishu consistently introduces herself on the world stage, as an international activist against FGM/C and this is her story...

Circumcised at eight years of age. Raped by wandering militiamen at twelve years of age. Fully infibulated again at thirteen years of age and then married off by her grandmother to a fifty-year old man who regularly beat her; Ifrah Ahmed runs away to a place she had once known as home in war torn Mogadishu to find it had become the kind of battleground now known as 'Black Hawk Down'.

A neighbour, recognizing her as the daughter of a woman whose sister had emigrated from Mogadishu to Minnesota, undertakes to find a way to get her out and sends a message through the Somali grapevine to seek help on her behalf.

Within days, a stranger appears at the door to tell her that he has been sent by her aunt from Minnesota and that she should follow him. She gathers her things into a plastic bag and sets out on the most perilous journey imaginable up through war - torn Somalia into Ethiopia all the way to Addis Ababa Airport in the company of traffickers. Finally landing, not in Minnesota, America - but in Dublin, Ireland.

Not a word of English, no prior education and hardly an item of clothing against the cold, she finds the food bizarre but the welcome hearty in the Irish asylum-seeking system. Her fears begin to subside and her traumatic days, she thinks, are behind her, until a routine medical smear test elicits such looks of horror on the faces of her Irish doctors that she suffers a profound sense of shame.

They say that anger is the flip side of shame. Channelling the feelings on both sides of that coin, she reacts incredibly quickly, learns English at break - neck speed and unearths an enviable technical talent for harnessing social media.

Within months she is campaigning for better conditions for asylum - seekers arriving in Ireland. She galvanizes her fellow refugees into action and sets up the 'United Youth of Ireland' to campaign for more understanding of foreign immigrants in Ireland. Joining 'Amnesty International' she becomes one of their most effective activists.

She works with a number of other NGOs, including UNICEF on special projects related to FGM. And single-handedly harasses every politician in Ireland right the way up to the president to pass FGM/C criminal justice legislation in Ireland.

As an Irish citizen, she presents her testimony on behalf of Ireland's MEPs on the occasion of the ratification of the UN Convention against FGM/C at the European Parliament and it is passed unanimously.

Thus commences her now lauded professional career as an international activist.

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A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU



GFM Film Productions Direct Activity Company

Production Information

A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU is a true story based on the testimony of Ifrah Ahmed, an Irish-Somali activist. In this female empowerment film, Ahmed (Aja Naomi King) escapes war-torn Somalia as a teenager. With the help of a human trafficker (Barkhad Abdi), she finds refuge in Ireland where she vows to devote her life to stopping the practice of female genital mutilation. With allies that include her friend Amala (Martha Canga Antonio), and Irish politicians Emer and Joe Costello (Orla Brady and Stanley Townsend), Ahmed embarks on a quest to bring her campaign to a global stage.

A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU is written and directed by Mary McGuckian (The Price of Desire, Intervention). McGuckian is co-producing with Umedia CEO Adrian Politowski (The Artist, Mandy). Executive producers are: Tom Harberd, Phil Hunt and Compton Ross for Head Gear Films (Mary Shelley); Anastasia Garrett, Jason Garrett and David Rogers for Premiere Picture (First Reformed); Peter Bevan, Nadia Khamlichi, Tatjana Kozar and Gilles Waterkeyn for Umedia; Lesley McKimm for Screen Ireland; Brian O'Shea for The Exchange; and Ifrah Foundation board members, Emma Beanland and Caroline Keeling.

The motion picture stars Aja Naomi King (The Birth of a Nation, How to Get Away with Murder) as Ifrah Ahmed. Martha Canga Antonio (Black) and Barkhad Abdi (Captain Phillips, Blade Runner 2049) also star with Somali icon Maryam Mursals. Irish cast include Pauline McLynn (Father Ted, Angela's Ashes), Orla Brady (Fringe, Into the Badlands), and Stanley Townsend (The Libertine, Happy-Go-Lucky).

Key crew include director of photography Michael Lavelle (Cardboard Gangsters), production designer Emma Pucci (RED 2), costume designer Nathalie Leborgne (Mr. Nobody). Music is composed by Nitin Sawhney (Breathe, Mowgli).

A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU is a Pembroke (Ireland) and Umedia (Belgium) production, with production services provided by Dune Film Productions in Morocco. Post-production took place at Windmill Studios, Dublin, and Umedia VFX, Brussels.

Filming took place in Belgium, Ireland and Morocco.

The Cast

Ifrah Ahmed
Amala
Hassan
Emer Costello
Joe Costello
Social worker

AJA NAOMI KING
MARTHA CANGA ANTONIO
BARKHAD ABDI
ORLA BRADY
STANLEY TOWNSEND
PAULINE MCLYNN



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Grandmother

MARYAM MURSAL

The Production Team

Writer and Director
Producers

MARY MCGUCKIAN
MARY MCGUCKIAN,
ADRIAN POLITOWSKI

Director of Photography
Production Designer
Music by
Costume Designer
Casting Directors

MICHAEL LAVELLE
EMMA PUCCI
NITIN SAWHNEY
NATHALIE LEBORGNE
MAUREEN HUGHES, DORIANE
FLAMAND

The Testimony of Ifrah Ahmed

A few years ago, the Irish writer-director Mary McGuckian was at the Cannes Film Festival in her role as a board member of IEFTA, a non-profit organisation that works with emerging talent from developing nations. IEFTA was at Cannes that year for an event to showcase four female Ethiopian film makers. In the midst of the crowd was a fabulously dressed woman. McGuckian assumed she was another film-maker.

When they spoke, however, the woman explained that she was in Cannes because the UN wanted to make a documentary about her life. To McGuckian's surprise, she spoke English with an Irish accent and lived in Drumcondra, a district of Dublin. Then Ifrah Ahmed began to tell her story.

"I told her I'm a campaigner against the practice of female genital mutilation [FGM]," says Ahmed. "I wanted to save young girls, who don't deserve to go through what happened to me, and many women like me. I decided to end female circumcision in Ireland, Somalia and all Africa. Not only FGM, but gender based violence. I told her how Ireland passed legislation banning FGM, and how I wanted to take this campaign globally. I told her I wanted to write a book, make a documentary and a film, about FGM."

McGuckian was fascinated with this Somali-born social activist. However, she had already made two films about real people in the past: footballer George Best in the biopic *Best* (2000), and designer Eileen Grey in *The Price of Desire* (2015). She swore to herself that she would never do it again.

"It's a huge responsibility," she explains. "There was no biography to use as a source for a film about Ifrah's life. There was a lot of press about her - a great deal in the public domain - but all that is the public pitch of Ifrah's campaign. I knew that trying to finance a film about FGM, with an Irish lead female character who is also from Africa, would be difficult. So my disappointment management level was extraordinary."

But then McGuckian had a light bulb moment. She asked Ahmed, who was born in Mogadishu in 1989, if she would give the director her testimony on camera. "I told her she needed to tell me her life story from beginning to end, so I can understand if there's something in this that warrants a feature film."

"I saw she was passionate and wanted to bring awareness to the issue," recalls Ahmed. "She said, 'Ifrah, I cannot promise this will become a film, but I will try'."

During the Galway Film Festival in Ireland, in the corner of a hotel, Ahmed gave her testimony to McGuckian and two cameramen over two days. This would become what McGuckian refers to as the Testimony of Ifrah Ahmed. "I was crying, being emotional, being happy, reliving all this," says Ahmed.

"She has never done it before and I would never ask her to do it again," says

McGuckian. "There were two robust cameramen in tears for two days. It's an unbelievable story that speaks to everything from war, the treatment of women in war, sexual assault in conflict, refugee status, asylum seeking, FGM and gender based violence. Ifrah's character is especially extraordinary. She's an incredibly charismatic and compelling person. The first rule of drama - particularly when it's a single-character narrative - is that the character should be empathetic and compelling."

In 2006, a Civil War was tearing apart Somalia. Ifrah Ahmed, then 17 years old, was forced to flee her native Mogadishu.

"She was attempting to leave war-torn Somalia with no money, no passport or identification, leaving everything behind in order to save her life," says Aja Naomi King, who plays Ifrah Ahmed in *A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU*. "She had to get from Somalia into Ethiopia, and then be smuggled onto international flights. The journey through Somalia and Ethiopia was harrowing. She was alone: a child, crossing borders."

Ahmed initially thought she was going to live with her aunt in the United States. Instead, she ended up in Ireland. "I never dreamt I would leave Somalia and come to Ireland," says Ahmed. "I was born in a warzone, lived in a warzone, I saw a lot of difficult things. When I came to Ireland, I was given a better life."

Adjusting to life in Ireland was difficult. "I remember when I first went to the asylum centre. I was sitting in the reception and it was really cold. I didn't understand any English. Even understanding how to eat the food was difficult. We don't have things like Weetabix and Cornflakes in Somalia. I had to learn how to eat."

During the asylum process, Ahmed was given a routine medical check-up. "For someone who doesn't speak the language, that's going to be incredibly overwhelming," says King. "You can't communicate, so you're fearful. If you've never had that experience before, it's terrifying. You have people touching you, coming from a culture where you're not meant to be touched by strangers. I remember reading one of her interviews where she said, 'I thought they were going to kill me'. She had no idea what was going on. "

When the medical staff discovered Ahmed's FGM, they responded with horror. The incident re-traumatized Ahmed. "The doctors and nurses didn't know anything about female genital mutilation," says the campaigner. "A man stood in front of me, asking how I got injured in my private area. Women were going, 'Jesus Christ, what is this all about?' I felt everyone was ignorant."

Yet the incident also served as an epiphany, inspiring Ifrah Ahmed to educate people and change laws around FGM. "For me, it was time to raise my voice, speak out, and say 'This is our culture. It happened to every woman. We knew it was bad in Somalia, but nobody discussed it. Living in Ireland helped me realize I should protect young girls.'"

In 2010, she established the United Youth of Ireland, a non-governmental organisation that nurtures young immigrants. In 2012, The Ifrah Foundation, her campaign against FGM, was instrumental in outlawing the practice in Ireland. She would go on to take her campaign against FGM and gender based violence to the European Parliament and United Nations.

Barkhad Abdi, who plays Ahmed's trafficker in the film, believes the world can learn much from Ahmed's story. "One person's testimony can change people," says the actor. "We have to find a way to stop FGM. But it's not only for Somali or Irish people; it's for any country that mistreats girls. They should learn from this story and change those habits once and for all."

Ifrah Ahmed's story is also one of optimism: it illustrates how one person - in her teens and 20's - can make a positive difference in the world and use her testimony as a catalyst for change.

"This is a hopeful story," nods Orla Brady, who plays Irish politician Emer Costello in *A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU*. "A young woman arrives in Ireland, by mistake. She doesn't have a word of English. She has a dress and one flip-flop. She is taken in, educated, and becomes an extraordinary Irish citizen."

After hearing Ifrah Ahmed's testimony, Mary McGuckian realised she now had the building blocks of a motion picture. This is a human tale of resilience, explains the writer-director. "Ifrah's life is perilous, but she turns a corner and there is a ray of sunshine. It's unbelievable."

Bringing Ifrah's story to the screen

Mary McGuckian knew the story of Ifrah Ahmed would make a fantastic film biopic, but she was sceptical about whether or not she could make it happen.

"It is very difficult to make films where the lead character is female, particularly if it's a single character narrative," she explains. "It's hard to make a movie about any Irish female character, let alone an African one who deals with such a sensitive subject. Also, there's no love story involved. I kept thinking, on the other hand, it's such an important story, I've to figure out a way to do it."

After recording Ahmed's testimony, the writer-director was in the U.S. trying to pitch a television project for another story. But at every meeting she attended, she started telling Ahmed's story. Producers and financiers would respond: "That's amazing, can I read the script?' I hadn't written a script yet. But I could tell the story pitched well."

Back at home, Screen Ireland, Ireland's state funding body, had committed money to films from a female perspective. McGuckian pitched it to them. Screen Ireland agreed to invest. The ball was rolling.

Throughout the process, McGuckian kept in close correspondence with Ahmed, who

now divides her time between Somalia and Ireland. "We often talked on Skype," says Ahmed. "Mary would fly me back to Dublin if necessary to discuss things. I visited her home. After she finished the first draft, she sent me the script. She always made sure I understood how the script would develop into a film.

McGuckian used Ifrah Ahmed's testimony to structure her screenplay. In the film, Ahmed (Aja Naomi King) relates her testimony while we visit her past in flashback. "The core of the story is from the moment she was trafficked out of Mogadishu to becoming an international campaigner. It stops at the EU Commission, when she gave her testimony to the European Parliament. It became a simple way to structure the film," says McGuckian.

The first act of the film - Ahmed's escape from Somalia - is terrifying in the telling.

"Ifrah went on a perilous journey, on the last bus from Mogadishu, through warzones and militia areas of Somalia. She was picked up by a trafficker at the Ethiopian border and taken to Addis Ababa. Then she realised it was the wrong trafficker. She escaped and went with another trafficker, thinking she was being taken to America. When she arrived in Dublin Airport, she thought she was in America," says McGuckian.

A key turning point in McGuckian's script is when Ahmed undergoes a routine medical examination. The Irish medical team then discovers she is a victim of FGM.

"This scene goes back and forwards from the moment her FGM was discovered to a flashback of what happened to her as a child. It was a horrific and traumatising experience, but it's the moment where Ifrah decides to dedicate her life to the campaign against female genital mutilation," continues the director.

In 2015, McGuckian approached Umedia, an international film group with offices in Brussels, with her script. "We were familiar with Mary's work," says Adrian Politowski, CEO and co-founder of Umedia, and co-producer of A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU. "We had grown to respect her as a filmmaker, having followed her career for many years."

"From the first read, we were inspired by the story's reality. It is brash and empowering, both in the retelling and in the roots of the true story. We were excited at the prospect, not just in making this movie but at the opportunity to get involved in the fight to end female genital mutilation across the globe. We are constantly looking for projects that inspire us to think in new and creative ways about how we can help become part of the solution to today's problems. A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU does just that. It works to illuminate the tale of Ifrah Ahmed, but it also mobilises its audience to do something."

Umedia came in as a full financial and production partner on the project. "Beyond our own tax shelter and equity contributions, we also worked with Mary and Pembridge Pictures to seek out additional equity partners in order to close the picture. That included bringing onboard financial partners such as Head Gear Films and Premiere Picture," adds Politowski.



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"The Irish-Belgian collaboration worked well," says McGuckian. "Umedia not only brought their own finance but raised additional finance in Belgium. The story was partially set in Belgium, so they were able to involve Screen Brussels and other Belgian partners."

Within a year of finishing the script in 2016, the film was prepped and financed. The week production commenced on A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU, the #MeToo movement began. Mistreatment of women is an underlying thesis of the film, so the timing was apt.

"We have been inspired by the countless woman in the industry who have drawn the curtain back on the underbellies of the sexism, harassment, and racism that exists in our community," says Politowski. "We've been listening to and championing strong, brave and exhilarating women who are speaking out. We found that same drive in Ifrah and her story. Through Ifrah and Mary, A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU is sure to be a project that impacts the industry as well as the world. We are grateful to be a part of that."

Now the task for Mary McGuckian was to do Ifrah Ahmed justice on screen.

"It feels like a big responsibility," says the director. "We've been given an opportunity to tell a story that we would not historically have been able to tell."

Casting

Mary McGuckian - writer, director and producer on A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU – wanted to cast a lead actor who was not only perfect for the role of Ifrah Ahmed, but also had a pedigree in successful films. In 2016, Birth of a Nation, a drama about the 1831 slave rebellion led by Nat Turner, electrified audiences. Aja Naomi King, the U.S. actress received particular acclaim for her role as Cherry, Turner’s wife. “It was clear Aja Naomi King was emerging as a rising star of the African American community,” says McGuckian. “She also has an uncanny resemblance to Ifrah.”

The director posted King the first draft of A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU. The actress read this draft, and every draft thereafter.

“I was in California, where I live, and it was sent to me late one night,” recalls King. “I couldn’t put it down. I was like, ‘Is this for real? Someone underwent all this hardship and then ended up doing such incredible things, at such a young age?’ I was blown away by knowing that Ifrah got legislation passed in her early 20’s. It’s one of those stories where you read it and think, ‘What have I done with my life?!’”

King felt moved by the intimacy of the story and how it reveals the world, in all its beauty and injustice, through Ahmed’s eyes. The screenplay’s origins in Ahmed’s testimony for McGuckian gave the actress confidence in its authenticity.

“The script was born out of who Ifrah is as a person and what matters most to her,” says King.

McGuckian subsequently met the actress and sent photos of her to Ahmed. A few weeks later, following an Ifrah Foundation event in Washington D.C., McGuckian and Ahmed flew to Los Angeles to meet King.

King recalls her first encounter with the campaigner: “I remember feeling very nervous, and a little scattered, because I was running from work to meet them and they were only going to be in town for a short amount of time. I get to the table and there’s this energetic, bubbly, vivacious young woman sitting there. I remember thinking, ‘My God, she’s intoxicating’. The second you sit down to talk to her, you can’t look away. She’s like light; you’re drawn to her.”

Ahmed bombarded the actress with questions. “I asked her if she was going to ‘role play’ Ifrah Ahmed, or if this is something passionate for her. Did she read anything about FGM since Mary sent her the screenplay? I remember she asked me a question about how we staged the Miss Ethnic Fashion Show (an event Ahmed organised in Dublin to promote FGM awareness). I was like, ‘Go to YouTube and find out yourself’.”

“Mary was like, ‘Ifrah!’ I said ‘That’s the reality’. I didn’t want her to come and act in a movie without taking on the responsibility. We are talking about women’s lives. We are talking about young girls who are mutilated, who die of bleeding, who face health risks. I

wanted someone impassioned.”

One moment from her first encounter with Ahmed stood out for King. “Mary stepped away at one point,” recounts the actress. “Ifrah reached across the table, grabbed my hand, and said 'My life doesn't matter, but if I can save one girl, then my life will matter'.”

Ahmed left their first meeting convinced that King was right for the role. “I found out she was part of the Black Lives Matter movement, which gave me confidence that she was a woman who was interested in human rights issues. Her passion to do this movie made me realise she was the right person.”

Another challenge was finding an actor to play Amala, Ifrah Ahmed’s best friend in *A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU*. Mary first saw Martha Canga Antonio in the movie *Black*, which was directed by two Belgian filmmakers.

“Martha gave an amazing performance in her debut film,” says Adrian Politowski, co-producer of *A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU*. “Since then, Martha was elected as one of the European Shooting Stars and presented to the international press at the Berlin Film Festival in 2016. *A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU* marks the start of her international career.”

McGuckian showed Antonio’s work to Ahmed. “I was amazed by this young African actress in Europe,” says Ahmed. Amala is not based on a single real person. Instead, she is an ensemble of a number of friends who supported Ahmed upon her arrival in Ireland and during her work as a campaigner.

“Amala is also a Somali girl who is a victim of FGM,” explains Antonio. “They meet in Dublin. Amala is there to support her and the whole movement.” When she read the screenplay, Antonio was moved by the story. “The movie doesn’t preach. It tells a story of a woman who was a victim and how she became stronger and ultimately saved other girls from being victims. It’s a human story. A beautiful message.”

The second lead is always difficult to cast, says McGuckian, “but Martha turned it into something golden.”

When it came to casting the Irish characters in *A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU*, Mary McGuckian called upon a few old friends. Orla Brady had starred in *A Price of Desire*, McGuckian’s 2015 film about Irish designer Eileen Grey. She has known the director for years. “When Mary gave me the script, I thought 'This is just so fabulously typical of her'. She’s very cause-driven and she wants to tell stories about people who are maybe a little forgotten by history. It was lovely to be reunited with her,” says Brady.

In *A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU*, Brady plays Emer Costello, an Irish politician who helped Ahmed achieve her goals in Ireland. When she first read the script, Brady wondered if the story had been exaggerated and its lead character made more heroic. She soon realised, however, that the story was verbatim: a visual retelling of Ahmed’s

testimony.

“I was drawn to the plain telling of that story. It's not amped up. I was struck by the disadvantage that Ifrah initially faced. The abuse on so many levels, including being a child in wartime. But instead of being a victim, she decided to generously fight for others who may be in the same situation.”

McGuckian has a long friendship with Pauline McLynn (Father Ted, Angela's Ashes), who plays Ifrah Ahmed's Irish social worker in the story. They went to college together, but this is the first time they worked together in their professional careers. McLynn describes the project as a reunion.

“It was brilliant when a script came through the door that was written by Mary McGuckian,” says McLynn. “She's a smashing Irish woman, telling the story of a new Irish woman who changed the world. When I read the script, I thought, 'I want to be part of this'.”

Irish actor Stanley Townsend (The Libertine, Happy-Go-Lucky) took the role of Joe Costello, husband of Emer: another politician who helped Ahmed's campaign.

“I've been living and working in England for the last 20 years, so I haven't been connected with Irish politics,” says Townsend. “This film has educated me about FGM. I didn't realise how shockingly widespread it was. Millions of women are affected by it. It doesn't carry any deep tradition, other than modern suppression. Ifrah's influence is extraordinary. She has opened our eyes.”

In casting the Somali actors in A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU, the producers cast their net internationally. Barkhad Abdi, who plays Ifrah's trafficker Hassan, is known around the world for his performances in films such as Captain Phillips and Blade Runner 2049. As a Somali, born in Mogadishu, he brings a personal perspective to the story. “Mogadishu is a city that is very dear to my heart,” he explains. “I have a lot of good memories of Mogadishu before the war. I plan to go back there one day.”

When he was cast in the role, Ifrah Ahmed told Abdi the story of how she was trafficked from Somalia to Ireland. The actor also used his own research to conjure up the character. “I've heard a lot of stories about people smuggling other people into different countries and continents,” says Abdi. “I did some research, but I was already somewhat familiar and all the risks that are involved.”

Between Barkhad Abdi and Maryam Mursals, A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU features two of the best known Somalis in the world. Mursals, who plays Ahmed's grandmother in the story, is a musical legend in her native country who counts Nina Simone and Peter Gabriel among her collaborators.

“All Somalis revere Maryam,” says Ahmed. “I met her in London before we started filming. She gave me a beautiful dress and said she will do whatever it takes to end FGM.”

Before production commenced, the key cast prepared for their roles. “Mary helped me understand Ifrah's journey from Somalia to Ireland and how she adjusted upon her arrival,” remarks King. “I feel very lucky because my director is a walking encyclopaedia.”

King underwent intensive training sessions with a dialect coach in order to speak Somali (and English with a Somali accent). Ifrah Ahmed and Barkhad Abdi both assisted her with the language. By the time the production commenced, she was speaking with a pure East African accent.

Michael Lavelle, cinematographer on the film, was impressed with the result. “I've never heard an American actor get rid of every vowel and consonant,” he says. “She learned the Somali lines phonetically. A friend of Ifrah's came on the shoot in Morocco and she said, 'You would swear she is a native Somali'.”

King, and other members of the cast playing real people, wanted to do justice to their characters. Brady spent time with Emer Costello before filming: “I wanted to understand who Emer was. Not to recreate her in terms of impersonation, but just to try and drink in her spirit.”

Unlike fictional roles, an actor can study living, real life characters, according to Stanley Townsend, who plays Joe Costello. “You maybe don't have the freedom that you have with a fictional character, but you do have stimuli from the life lived: mannerisms, inflections, voice. You have to be responsible and try and capture the essence of the person. You also have a responsibility to the story.”

The Production

Prior to filming commencing on A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU, Mary McGuckian – screenwriter, director, and producer on the project – began brainstorming with Emma Pucci, production designer, about the film’s visual aesthetic. McGuckian had worked with Pucci on her previous film, The Price of Desire, so they had a working shorthand.

“We spent a lot of time together, thinking about what this would look like,” says McGuckian. “I wanted it to emulate Ifrah in look, colour and feel. So we came up with the “Five V’s”. It would be vivid like her personality. It would have verisimilitude and vérité: truthful and strong. It would be voracious and victorious. A celebration of the survivor. A celebration of all her achievements, rather than a downbeat movie about war.” Michael Lavelle, cinematographer on A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU, also approached his task with the “Five V” mantra. Lavelle set out to create an aesthetic that captures the world from Ahmed’s vantage. Almost all of the film is shot on handheld cameras in order to capture the intensity of her life.

“We want to hold true to Ifrah,” says Lavelle. “She is an incredibly colourful presence, so we wanted the film to be colourful. Because it deals with a dark topic, we tried to hold it in a rich colour space.”

Finding locations was another challenge, as eight countries are featured in the story. “I tried to design it in a way in which it could work in three countries,” explains McGuckian. “It’s an Irish story and most of it happens in Ireland, but there are other European territories and the Somalian aspects of the story.”

The creative team spent six months scouting for locations. The production was in three separate shooting blocks over a six-month period. The story opens in Mogadishu, where Ahmed was raised. Filming in Somalia was unfeasible, due to security concerns, so Pucci and McGuckian scouted for locations in Morocco. They settled upon the city of Essaouira as a double for Mogadishu.

“Ifrah told us that it’s very similar aesthetically,” says Michael Lavelle, who comes from a documentary background and has filmed in Africa. “When you’re on the coast of Essaouira, looking down the shoreline and you see the outlines of the buildings, it’s like a mirror image of Mogadishu. A lot of the locations, that Mary found with the scouts, were close together. We were able to shoot a lot of diverse scenes within a compact time. When we got to Morocco, we worked with a lightened crew. That was to hold on to the documentary authenticity of the film. If you’re more mobile, you can get around to these places quicker.”

Early moments of the film include Ahmed’s escape from her home city, during the Second Battle of Mogadishu in 2006. “We filmed this sequence in an old Jewish quarter in Morocco that is completely demolished,” recalls Pucci. “These areas already look bombed out. SFX and VFX people will add the smoke; sound designers will add the sounds of war.”

In shooting this sequence, Lavelle wanted to capture the unease he felt while reading the script: “When you read about a 16-year-old girl running through the streets, having been told not to look back. Seeing women dying beside her - children screaming, panic, militiamen firing guns - it induces terror. We tried to incorporate that into the aesthetic.”

McGuckian nods: “It's certainly a bang of an opening for a film.”

A number of scenes were shot in Belgium. The production team built a Somali refugee camp in an abandoned industrial site near Brussels. Pucci planted tents on the site and poured sand on the floor. Ahmed's villa, the interiors of Ethiopian apartments, and Ahmed's grandmother's hut, were recreated at this location. In the story, Ahmed is trafficked out of Ethiopia and into Europe, so the team faced the challenge of recreating her journey on aircraft and through airports in Addis Ababa, Frankfurt, and Dublin.

“We were lucky to be able to shoot most of these scenes at Liège Airport,” continues Adrian Politowski, co-producer. “Liège is one of the most important cargo airports in Europe and operates most of their flights during the night. At the time of the shoot, the airport was only operating a few flights per week during the day, which gave us a lot of freedom. We had access to almost the entire airport during the shoot.

Aja Naomi King, who plays Ifrah Ahmed in *A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU*, was impressed: “When we got there I was like, 'Wow, we're in a real airport'. That's kind of cool.”

The bulk of the movie was shot on location in Ireland. The asylum centre and youth hostel, where Ahmed is placed upon arrival to the country, were filmed outside Dublin. The Dublin Convention Centre, a hospital and a hotel, were also employed. “These were not difficult locations for me to dress because the props were already there,” says Pucci. “Everyone in Dublin was very helpful. People want to help as much as possible.”

However, Ireland is famous for its incremental weather. One of the worst snow storms in recent memory hit the production mid-shoot. The team was originally intending to film scenes at Dublin Airport. When the storm hit, it was forced to change location to a ferry terminal. “We had to pile as many extras as we could get, on the snowiest day in Irish history, then shoot in a very smart way to try and hide the fact we didn't have a lot of people there,” laughs Michael Lavelle, cinematographer.

Due to the storm, the film-makers found themselves without any lighting crew when making a scene in which the human trafficker (Barkhad Abdi) and Ifrah Ahmed (Aja Naomi King) arrive at the refugee centre during the night, recalls Lavelle. “Luckily I had asked for a car with a sunroof, so we opened the sunroof and moved the car under a street lamp. We used that to light the scene.”

The cinematographer used an iPhone to illuminate the eyes of the actors and a hotel towel to diffuse the light. An iPhone, a towel, and street lamp: this was guerrilla film-

making at its finest.

Due to the breadth of locations used for the film, production designer Emma Pucci was conscious of maintaining continuity. “Sometimes we are filming an interior in Belgium, but the exterior is in Morocco. So we have to be sure you don’t feel as though you are changing country during the course of the movie.”

Using the same crew across the production, helped McGuckian achieve continuity. The crew was predominantly Belgian. Seamus Murphy, the second camera operator, is a respected stills photographer who has a background of filming in Mogadishu. There was gender parity amongst the crew, with as many women employed as men. “We all seemed to click in. There was a very youthful and enthusiastic attitude toward the material,” says McGuckian. The only problem with having such an international team was juggling a wide variety of languages: English, French, Somali, Moroccan, and Irish slang!

“We defaulted a lot to French,” laughs Lavelle. “My French got better on the shoot.”

“The real challenge was Somali,” continues McGuckian. “The actors who didn’t speak Somali would sometimes use headphones and Lfrah would read the lines to them.”

In her role as screenwriter, producer and director, Mary McGuckian pulled everyone together to tell the story of a remarkable woman. “A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU is one hundred percent a product of Mary and her resilience,” says Adrian Politowski, co-producer. “She never gave up in her dedication to making this film the best it could be. Her experience as an accredited film-maker brought life and confidence to the project.”

Aja Naomi King, who plays Lfrah Ahmed, concurs: “I rarely get to work with a female director. Few female directors are given the opportunities to write a story, let alone have it directed and financed. She’s leading the ship here. Her dedication to Lfrah, this cause, Lfrah’s story and the telling of it, is inspiring.”

Lights, camera, Ahmed!

From the beginning, Mary McGuckian wanted Ifrah Ahmed to be a central part of the creative process on A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU. "There is a huge responsibility to carry someone's story when it's so personal and such a sensitive subject," says the writer, producer, and director. "I wanted her to come on the journey and be a part of it. She would never be excluded from the script, the set, or any aspect of the production."

Ahmed continues: "Mary gave me an opportunity to know what was happening in each scene. She made sure I was there. Even during the shoot she wanted to make sure everything was correct and represented me correctly. Mary wanted me to be part of it."

This was more than just a courtesy toward the activist, it was also a means to telling her story as truthfully and authentically as possible. From the early days of preproduction, Ahmed was heavily involved in the design of the project. She and Emma Pucci, production designer, became close friends.

"Ifrah is the kind of person who turns a grain of an idea into gold-dust," says McGuckian. "She was very involved in casting. She did Somali language work with the actors. She was on set with the sound crew all day. By the end of the shoot she was running every department. At one point Michael Lavelle, the cinematographer, said 'Ifrah, you didn't quite make it into the camera department'. She pulled out her phone and showed him a picture of her with a camera on her shoulder. There isn't any aspect of a movie she couldn't run herself. It was a very unusual, unique situation."

Inevitably, Aja Naomi King became close friends with Ahmed, who she plays in A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU.

"Ifrah is on set just about every day," says King. "She's never trying to give me acting notes, but I'm keenly aware of what this film means to her, what it means to me and what this story is about. With her right there, and wanting to do her justice, it's a little nerve wracking. But I think that's good because the stakes are high."

Ahmed laughs about their rapport. "The crews often mix up our names," says the campaigner. "They call me Aja, and call her Ifrah. Aja's mother said we look like each other. She's brave. Somali is not her language; but she has learned to speak it. She's just amazing."

Orla Brady, who plays Emer Costello in the film, recalls her first day on set in Belgium. It was a scene in which Ifrah Ahmed gives a speech at the European parliament. "It was the first time I had heard Aja in character," says Brady. "I remember being close to tears. She did it so beautifully. It was stunning work. Aja is fabulous in the role. She has caught Ifrah's seriousness and her joy."

The campaigner offered advice to the other actors, such as Martha Canga Antonio, who plays her friend Amala in the movie. "We spoke a lot," says Antonio. "She talked a lot



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about her friends who surrounded her, especially in the early days when she first arrived in Ireland. But I also had the freedom to interpret it myself. It wasn't like I was given guidelines of how to play Amala. Ifrah was story-telling about the people she met, which allowed me to create the character of Amala."

Reliving her past experiences was not always easy for Ahmed. "There were a lot of moments when I started thinking back to my childhood in Somalia. I thought about my family, my sisters. How people were killed. How women were raped and subjected to different types of violence."

The scene when Ahmed's personal history of FGM is discovered through a routine medical check-up she found difficult. "When they were shooting, I was crying. It wasn't easy."

But everyone on set was impressed by Ahmed's resilience, youthful energy, and cheerfulness.

"Ifrah is a young woman who is very excited about life," explains Orla Brady. "She is very happy to be in Ireland and proud of her Irish citizenship. She is excited about her cause. She believes she can change the world. It is possible to be serious about what you do, yet not take yourself too seriously."

A Dedicated Follower of Fashion

The production design team was vital to A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU. Ifrah Ahmed is a colourful person in terms of her aesthetic as well as her personality. She often wears colours that match or compliment her environment, so the design team used this approach when it came to crafting her look on screen.

Costume designer Nathalie Leborgne (Mr. Nobody, The Invader) began the pre-production process by researching the war in Somalia, and looking at pictures of Ahmed dressed in her Somalian garb.

This story is set across three different periods: 1999, during Ahmed's childhood; 2006, when she escapes from Somalia; and 2012, when the first phase of her campaign comes to fruition. Leborgne was conscious to accurately replicate clothing from each era. For characters such as Martha, who plays Ahmed's friend Amala, the clothes are more casual. "She has been in Ireland maybe three years before Ifrah, so she's wearing western clothes. Ifrah is integrated in Ireland too, but tradition is hugely important for her," says Leborgne.

In real life, Ifrah Ahmed sometimes wears three different dresses in the same day. So quantity, as well as quality, was crucial. Leborgne made 40 different dresses for Aja Naomi King to wear in her role as Ahmed.

"Ifrah has a mix of costumes," says the costume designer. "She wears traditional jilbab dresses, beautiful jewellery, belts, western jackets. She's always wearing a scarf or hijab. She mixes all that in with Indian fabrics. In Europe, it's difficult to find Somalian fabrics. I had some Skype meetings with Ifrah when she was in Somalia and I requested different types of fabrics."

Ahmed brought material back from Somalia for Leborgne. On one occasion, the campaigner visited a Somali shop in London to source scarves. Authenticity of costume was important for Ahmed: "I wanted them to understand my culture. You can find 1000 materials in Europe, but it might not necessarily look like Somalian material. I wanted to make sure we get it right. I'm carrying the flag for Somalia."

Ahmed was in her element when it came to costume design. "Ifrah loves to dress up: she's big into fashion," says King. "One of the things she would do is teach me how to tie the Somali scarf in various ways. She does it so quickly a lot of the time. I'm like, 'Wait! Do it again, let me videotape you'. We had a lot of fun. She's very opinionated and wants to make sure it has to be the real thing. It has to be true."

One of the stand-out moments of Ahmed's campaigning was when she organised the annual Miss Ethnic Fashion Show from 2009 to 2013. The event was intended not only to celebrate immigrant women in Ireland, but also to promote awareness of FGM. The filmmakers decided to replicate this fashion show in A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU.



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"Thanks to Mary's ingenuity and Ifrah's charm, we managed to bring people from all walks of life along to this event," explains Michael Lavelle, cinematographer. The show served not only as a scene for the film, but also as a campaign event to spread the word against FGM.

A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU might be a story of survival and resilience, but it is a contemporary costume drama too. "All these fabulous fabrics and materials - it's just amazing," laughs Ifrah Ahmed. "Now I feel like I should have A Girl From Mogadishu clothing line!"

Ifrah's Campaign

It would not be an exaggeration to describe female genital mutilation (FGM) as one of the greatest human rights issues affecting women across the world. The procedure, which intentionally alters or causes injury to female genital organs, has no health benefits for girls and women. Over 200 million girls have been cut in 30 countries - mostly in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia - usually between the ages of infancy and 15. The practice is internationally recognised as a violation of human life that leads to many medical problems.

Ifrah Ahmed has dedicated her life to eradicating the practice of FGM, and educating people about the mistreatment of women and girls around the world. Many of the cast and crew involved in *A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU* were unaware of the extent of the problem before taking part in this production.

"I first found out about FGM when I came to the U.S. from Somalia," says Barkhad Abdi, who plays Ahmed's trafficker in the story. "It just wasn't something that boys talked about at home, especially kids, so I didn't really know about it until I grew up. I don't know why people still carry out FGM in Somalia and other countries. It's harmful to girls. I don't know why they are doing this, it doesn't make sense."

Aja Naomi King, who plays Ifrah Ahmed in *A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU*, is proud to align herself with Ahmed's cause. "I was unaware of the dismal extent of female genital mutilation," she remarks. "I think it is an issue that remains on the periphery. To learn that 200 million women worldwide have had to survive this experience and its repercussions, it's simply heartbreaking and it is clearly a human rights violation. We have to be clear, this isn't just happening in countries like Somalia. It's happening in countries like the U.S. and England, this is happening to girls all over the world and it must stop."

The Ifrah Foundation has helped raise consciousness about FGM. "It's a child abuse issue: an issue of violence upon women," says Orla Brady, who plays Emer Costello, an Irish politician, in *A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU*. "One of the initiatives I thought was interesting was they attached FGM to the #MeToo movement. In the past, a lot of us were a bit reticent around FGM, thinking it is a religious practice and you can't comment on people's beliefs. But, of course, it is not religious at all. It is child abuse."

Adrian Politowski, co-producer of *A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU*, hopes the film will inspire audiences to engage with their local communities to help eradicate FGM. "With movements like Think Globally, Act Locally, we hope audiences around the world will take Ifrah's journey and adapt her bravery, strength and dedication into their own struggles," says Politowski. "Now, more than ever, we see the importance of imploring young woman to get involved in politics and activism. Ifrah's work isn't over and neither is ours."

Ahmed, however, is modest about her achievements. "I share my personal story, but

my story is in the past," says the activist. "I'm not going to be circumcised again. There are young girls - your neighbours, friends of your children, school friends, girls sitting across from you in a restaurant - at risk. My hope for this movie is to spread awareness. What happened to me happened. I can never change it. I can never go back. But I can help young girls who are raised in this world and should not go through this horrible practice. We need to save them."

A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU is a story about hope. It is also an immigrant's tale in an era when immigrants are vilified. Without Ireland's refugee policy, Ifrah Ahmed would never have been able to bring her campaign to the world.

"When asylum seekers and refugees come to Ireland, they are looked after by the front line of social workers," says Pauline McLynn, who plays Ahmed's social worker in the movie. "I'd like to think we are still a generous nation who welcomes people. Let's continue to welcome people."

In speaking about the African asylum experience, Ahmed's story also speaks about Ireland's history of emigration. "It's important not to lose sight of the fact she was welcomed in Ireland," says Stanley Townsend, who plays Joe Costello. "That's a great credit to Irish society. I've always felt we, of all people, should have our arms open to asylum seekers because we have sought and received asylum all over the world. One of the things that made my heart sing in the story was that Ireland is a good country to come to."

Ahmed agrees: "There are some issues, but for the most part Ireland is a positive place for asylum seekers. Ireland is a great place that welcomes immigrants and new communities. In reality, my asylum process was easy. I was one of the thousands of people who came to Ireland who had been granted refugee status."

A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU tackles serious issues, but like Ifrah Ahmed, it does not preach. Instead, according to Martha Canga Antonio (Amala), "it tells a story of a woman who was a victim and how she became stronger and ultimately saved other girls from being victims. It's a beautiful message."

Mary McGuckian has no desire to graphically illustrate the horror of FGM. "It's isn't my intention to shame or horrify people in taking on the subject," she says. "As a filmmaker, it was important not to objectify the issue, or characters living with the issue. A lot of thought went into how I would tell this story and not underestimate or diminish the issue, but at the same time turn it into something positive: something an audience can empathise with. After all, Ifrah Ahmed has been doing just that for the last 10 years."

For more information: www.ifrahfoundation.org

THE CHARACTERS

Aja Naomi King on Ifrah Ahmed

"Ifrah is an activist. I count myself as an activist too. It's nice when you can align yourself with someone who is trying to bring about some kind of change, however small. The inspiring thing about Ifrah is that she doesn't see the problem; sees the possibility of the solution. She's like, 'People are suffering, so this is what we do. This is how we solve this. She doesn't get bogged down by the burden of what we can and can't control. She looks at what we can do to make it happen.

When I first met Ifrah I was nervous. I thought, 'I'm going to play this person. I have to do her justice'. It was nerve wracking. It took a while before I could be myself around her. I would catch myself wanting to observe her, as opposed to interacting with her. Thankfully, I got over that.

I think there is more responsibility playing a real person, because you have to honour that person's existence. Cherry Turner, who I played in *The Birth of a Nation*, is a real historical figure, but she is not around to tell her side of the story, so I had to give life to that and honour her story, her struggle, and her experience. I think it's more challenging to play someone who is still around."

Martha Canga Antonio on Amala

"Amala is an ensemble of a number of friends who supported Ifrah during her campaigns in Ireland. Some people were ready to support Ifrah, no matter what. Amala is not based on one single character: she's all of those people in one person. So in this story, Amala is Ifrah's best friend. Their friendship is very important. Amala has also been a victim of FGM, but like a lot of girls worldwide she never spoke about it. Some victims feel guilty.

Helping Ifrah is a way for Amala to speak out about FGM and tell her story. The friendship is very strong between them because they understand each other. In the beginning they are in a country where they don't know the language: they come from a different culture. They are more like sisters.

Amala understands that Ifrah is the sort of person who, if she wants something, will get it. Ifrah is so driven. Amala is with the FGM movement during the whole journey in *A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU*. Their friendship becomes stronger, the further they get with their goal, which is to banish FGM."

Barkhad Abdi on Hassan

"Hassan smuggles people into Europe. There's a dark side to him. Ifrah's aunt sent

Hassan to take her to Minnesota in the U.S. but he actually takes her to Ireland. So he accompanies her on that journey. He helps her travel from Africa to Europe by using a lot of false passports and fake names. He takes her by airplane from one airport to another.

I wouldn't say he is friendly towards Ifrah. He can't risk being friendly. So he gives her orders and expects her to follow those rules. It might seem as though they are not travelling together, but he's always looking out for her and making sure she doesn't get him in trouble. He's making money from this, obviously. But it's a risky job. If he is caught, he may end up in jail or get deported.

In A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU, when he discovers Ifrah has become an activist against female genital mutilation, he is surprised. He threatens her. He tries to stop her. He likes to follow traditional rules. He cares a lot about the values of the family, the tribe, the systems."

Pauline McLynn on the Social Worker

"When Ifrah arrived in Ireland, she thought she was on her way to America. But she ended up in Dublin. Ifrah had a torturous journey out of war-torn Somalia, across Europe, and then she experienced the nervousness of flying into Dublin and wondering if she would be turned back at immigration.

So she arrived in a fragile state. Ifrah was immediately taken into the care of the state. Her first port of call was social workers. I play all of the social workers that Ifrah encountered, rolled into one, for the purposes of the story. I think some of the unsung heroes in Ireland are the people who help refugees and asylum seekers when they arrive. The social worker, who I play, makes sure Ifrah sees the right people, gets the right treatment, and is looked after. If you experience any of Ifrah's human life - be it fictionally, as we are lucky enough to do, or in reality - you realise she is such a force of nature that you fall into her slipstream.

I think all the social workers who helped her will be proud when they see this movie. They will be able to think, 'We had a small part to play in what happened'."

Stanley Townsend on Joe Costello

"Joe Costello, the Irish Labour politician, meets this young girl from Mogadishu and is impressed with how articulate, challenging and wonderful she is as a young woman, especially having gone through what she's gone through. He responds to her humanity; he also responds to her politically. She carries a political message that is useful to him in his political and socialist agenda, so he lends his support to her project.

In A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU, Joe Costello facilitates Ifrah Ahmed's campaign. He connects her to Ireland's presidential campaign. She's such a powerhouse of humanity that she takes the ball and runs with it. She becomes a cause célèbre.

I didn't know Joe prior to taking on this role, but I had seen him on TV. When I was preparing for the role, I watched him on YouTube and studied his voice and mannerisms. His politics are close to my own. On my first day of shooting, we were filming outside the Dail [Ireland's government buildings in Dublin] and Joe came along,



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so I met him and his wife. I was dressed as him, playing him, so that was very strange and wonderful."

Orla Brady on Emer Costello

"Emer is a living former mayor and Member of the European Parliament [MEP]. She's a well known political figure around Dublin. She's a woman who is a doer; someone who is passionate about certain causes. She's determined, capable and kind. That was one of the things I liked about the character.

Ifrah met Emer after door stepping Joe Costello, her husband, who she got involved with her cause. One evening she was hosting her Miss Ethnic Ireland fashion show. Joe had promised to be there, but sent his wife. Lo and behold, Emer appeared in Ifrah's life. Once you meet Ifrah, you're onboard. So Emer brought Ifrah to speak at the European Parliament.

When I was offered the role, at first I thought I should turn it down. I'm not great at doing a perfect impersonation of someone we all know. But Mary didn't want us to play the real people. She wanted us to take inspiration from the character, but not do an impersonation, which I was pleased about. I was free to approach the script in the way you do with a fictional character and interpret it as you see fit."

BIOGRAPHIES

AJA NAOMI KING

Aja Naomi King currently stars as Michaela Pratt in the hit ABC drama *How To Get Away With Murder*. Other recent work includes the feature film *THE UPSIDE* opposite Kevin Hart, Nicole Kidman, and Bryan Cranston, a lead role in Fox Searchlight's *THE BIRTH OF A NATION* opposite Armie Hammer, which won the Audience Award and Grand Jury Prize in the U.S. Dramatic Competition at the Sundance Film Festival. King has also appeared as the leading role in the feature film *REVERSION*, as well as Whit Stillman's *DAMSELS IN DISTRESS*, *THE REWRITE* for Castle Rock with Hugh Grant, and a lead role in Christopher Shinn's *FOUR* opposite Wendell Pierce.

Aja received the "Shining Star" award at the 2017 Essence Black Women in Hollywood Awards, a 2017 NAACP Image Award Nomination for "Best Supporting Actress in a Feature Film, a 2016 Elle Women in Hollywood Award, and a "Best Supporting Actress in a Drama Series" nomination at the 2015 NAACP Image Awards.

Aja is a global spokeswoman for L'Oreal Paris and has graced the covers of *Vanity Fair*, *Elle*, *Marie Claire* and *Glamour Magazine*.

King is a graduate of the Yale School of Drama.

MARTHA CANGA ANTONIO

Martha Canga Antonio is an actress who starred in *BLACK* (2015), *A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU* (2018), and *CLEO* (2018). She has made appearances on the television series *La foret*.

In 2014, from 450 candidates Antonio was chosen to perform the character Mavela in the film *Black* by directors Adil El Arbi and Bilall Fallah. She did not have any acting experience but was nevertheless selected by the filmmakers. In November 2015 she was voted best actress at the Black Nights Film Festival for this performance.

She was nominated a European Shooting Star at The Berlin International Film Festival in 2016.

BARKHAD ABDI

Barkhad Abdi was born in Somalia and spent his early years there. When he was seven, his family moved to Yemen where he lived until he was fourteen. His mother applied and got a green card for her and her family to move to the United States, which is when he landed in Minneapolis and has called that home ever since.

When Captain Phillips was casting the roles of the Somali pirates, they had an open casting in his adoptive hometown. Barkhad was one of 700 young men who appeared for the audition, and after a long process, won the role of "Muse." For his performance in the film, he was nominated for an Oscar, Golden Globe and SAG Award and won the BAFTA and London Critics' awards.

He has been working steadily ever since. He was seen in EYE IN THE SKY (starring Helen Mirren, Alan Rickman and Aaron Paul, directed by Oscar winner Gavin Hood), THE BROTHERS GRIMSBY (starring Sacha Baron Cohen, directed by Louis Leterrier) and EXTORTION (starring Danny Glover and Eion Bailey, directed by Paul Volken). His most recently released films are THE PIRATES OF SOMALIA (in which he stars with Evan Peters and Al Pacino, premiering at the Tribeca Film Festival), GOOD TIMES (starring with Robert Pattinson) and BLADE RUNNER 2049 (opposite Ryan Gosling, directed by Denis Villeneuve).

He just completed THE EXTRAORDINARY JOURNEY OF THE FAKIR (directed by Ken Scott), A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU (directed by Mary McGuckian) and BENEATH A SEA OF LIGHTS (directed by Neel Kumar).

ORLA BRADY

Orla was born in Dublin and grew up on the east coast. At 25 she left Ireland to pursue a theatre education and career in acting in Paris, France. Orla has been acting professionally ever since and hosts a myriad of acting credits across many mediums. Television credits include: Into the Badlands, Collateral, American Odyssey, Banished, Doctor Who, The Deep, Strikeback, Mistresses, Wallander, FRINGE and Shark. Film credits include: THE FOREIGNER, THE PRICE OF DESIRE, A LOVE DIVIDED and THE LUZHIN DEFENSE AND SILENT GRACE. Theatre credits include: Triptych, Blinded by the Sun, Three Sisters, The Ulster Trilogy, The House of Bernarda Alba and Hamlet.

MARYAM MURSAL

Mursal was born in Somalia and grew up with her 4 sisters. As a teenager she began to sing professionally in the capital city Mogadishu. Maryam's unique blend of blues and soul together with more local influences made her a 'hit' amongst her peers. She famously teamed up with Peter Gabriel to record the track 'The Journey'. Mursal was the first female muslim 'star' in a heavily male dominant Islamic society. She is also an actress, known for A GIRL FROM MOGADISHU (2018) and DANGEROUS CROSSINGS, THE MAKING OF A CAMPAIGN (2017).

PAULINE MCLYNN

Pauline McLynn is a renowned actress and best-selling writer. She graduated from Trinity College Dublin with a degree in History of Art and Modern English. It was in Trinity where Pauline first fostered her acting talents. She has since built a successful career in the arts with many credits to her name.

TELEVISION

Television includes: Drop Dead Weird Series 1 (TG4), Gameface (Channel 4) Eastenders (BBC), Father Figure (BBC), Threesome (Comedy Central), Shameless (Channel 4), The Bleak Old Ship of Stuff (BBC) and Pramface (BBC). She appeared in all 3 seasons of Jam and Jerusalem (BBC), Bremner, Bird and Fortune (Channel 4, six series), High Hopes (BBC), French and Saunders (BBC), TV To Go (BBC), The Dark Ages (ITV), It Happened Last Year, Dalziel and Pascoe, Family, Aristocrats and Ballykissangel all for BBC. She is well known for her award-winning role as Mrs. Doyle in Father Ted (Hatrick/ Channel 4).

FILM

Film includes: Jim Sheridan's SECRET SCRIPTURE, Stephen Bradley's NOBLE, Helen in GYPO, Sister Hilda opposite Brendan Blethyn in THE CALLING, IRIS directed by Richard Eyre, HEIDI, ANGELA'S ASHES directed by Alan Parker, THE MOST FERTILE MAN IN IRELAND, AND EVERLASTING PIECE directed by Barry Levinson and WHEN BRENDAN MET TRUDY directed by Kieron J Walsh. Previous film work includes; QUILLS, NORA, HER OWN RULES, GUILTTRIP.

THEATRE

Most recent theatre includes: DAISY PULLS IT OFF at The Park Theatre, EAST IS EAST tour directed by Sam Yates, KNIGHT OF THE BURNING PESTLE at The Globe Theatre, London and HAPPY DAYS at The Sheffield Crucible. With the Abby Theatre: THE TROJAN WOMAN, COMEDY OF ERRORS, YERMA & ANTIGONE. With The Gate Theatre, Dublin: THE DOUBLE DEALER, TARTUFFE, ABSURD PERSON SINGULAR and SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL. With Rough Magic: THE TAMING OF THE SHREW, OUR COUNTRY'S GOOD, THE TEMPEST, TOP GIRLS and THE CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE.

WRITING

She has also published 8 best-selling novels, Something for the Weekend (1999), Better Than A Rest (2001), Right on Time (2002), The Woman on the Bus (2004), Summer in the City (2005), Bright Lights and Promises (2007), Missing You Already (2009) and The Time Is Now (2010). In 2012 she published her first novel for young people, Jenny Q, Stitched Up! with Puffin Books, and the sequel Jenny Q, Unraveled.

STANLEY TOWNSEND

Stanley starred with rave reviews in the one man show 'Icantata' at The Galway International Arts Festival 2018 directed by Sam Yates having worked with him earlier in the year in the wonderfully reviewed run of 'Glengarry Glen Ross' as Levine at London's Playhouse Theatre, opposite Christian Slater. Stanley has worked with such great directors such as Sam Mendes in both 'King Lear' and at The Royal Court; Rufus Norris

in 'Under the Blue Sky', Ian Rickson in 'The Alice Trilogy' and Conor McPherson in 'The Shining City.' Stanley played the lead in Jeremy Herrin's 'The Nether' both at The Royal Court and The West End Transfer.

Stanley is due to appear in the Channel4's highly anticipated drama, 'Jerusalem', Netflix's 'The Spy' as well as 'Informer', opposite Paddy Considine. Recent television appearances have included critically acclaimed shows such as Amazon's 'The Collection' and the BBC's 'The Hollow Crown II'. Stanley has also appeared in 'Fleming', '24 live another Day', 'New worlds', 'Quirke', 'Call The Midwife', 'The Shadow Line', 'Zen', 'Spooks', 'The Commander', 'Hustle', 'Walking the Dead' and 'Sherlock'. He also reprised his rolls in ABC's hilarious 'Galavant'.

Stanley most recently appeared in 'The Current War', opposite Benedict Cumberbatch and Tom Holland. He was also seen in Stephen Frears' Academy Award winning 'Florence Foster Jenkins' alongside Meryl Streep and Hugh Grant. Other film credits include 'The Voices' and 'One Chance', in the iconic role of Luciano Pavarotti. 'Lovely Louise', 'Killing Bono' directed by Nick Hamm, Mike's Leigh's 'Happy Go Lucky', Mike Newell's 'Into the West', Jim Sheridan's 'In the Name of the Father' with Daniel Day-Lewis, 'The Van' directed by Stephen Frears, Peter Greenaway's 'The Luper', and 'The Libertine' with Johnny Depp.

MARY MCGUCKIAN – WRITER/DIRECTOR/PRODUCER

Mary McGuckian has been producing, writing and directing feature films independently for over twenty years. A Girl from Mogadishu marks Irish filmmaker Mary McGuckian's twelfth independent auteur film as she celebrates twenty years as an independent filmmaker.

Known for her collaborative approach when working with actors, past pictures include Man On The Train with Donald Sutherland and Larry Mullen Jr. (2011); The Amorality Trilogy Plus One (2006-2010), four films featuring an international ensemble cast which includes Lothaire Bluteau, Donna D'Errico, Colm Feore, Rupert Graves, Ian Hart, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Jordi Molla, Andie MacDowell, Bill Patterson, Amanda Plummer, Jennifer Tilly, John Sessions, and Sarah Stockbridge; as well as The Bridge of San Luis Rey (2005) with Kathy Bates, Gabriel Byrne, Robert DeNiro, Harvey Keitel, The Polish Brothers and F. Murray Abraham.

Mary's films have been presented at festivals worldwide both in and out of competition on many occasions including Tribeca and Sundance in the US, Locarno and Venice in Europe, and Edinburgh, London and Galway in her home countries.

Best Feature Film Awards include, 2001 Temecula and Fort Lauderdale Film Festivals, for 'Best', San Diego Film Festival for 'Intervention', Ojai film festival for 'The Making of Plus One'. In 2009, she was the recipient of the Annual Achievement Award from the Women's



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International Film and Television Awards in Los Angeles but takes most pride in the numerous accolades picked up by the actors who have collaborated with her.

ADRIAN POLITOWSKI – PRODUCER

Adrian Politowski co-founded Umedia in 2004 and has grown the company into a leading international production group with a turnover of \$150M+ and over 200 staff spread throughout offices in Brussels, London, Paris, Vancouver and Los Angeles. The group focuses on a wide variety of the industry including development, financing, production, visual effects and finishing.

Adrian has produced over 400 films, including multi-Academy Award-winning, *THE ARTIST*. He also produced a number of recent releases: *I KILL GIANTS* which he produced alongside Chris Columbus and stars Zoe Saldana; *MANDY*, which had its domestic premiere at Sundance in the Midnight Selection and its International premiere at Cannes in Directors Fortnight, the film stars Nicolas Cage and Andrea Riseborough; and *SUBMERGENCE* by Wim Wenders starring Alicia Vikander and James McAvoy.

With a love for international film Adrian has brought some of the most thrilling and vital stories to the screen over the last 15 years. He has worked tirelessly to create a space for European productions to thrive in the American market and beyond, and he has fostered international relationships across multiple film communities.

MICHAEL LAVELLE – CINEMATOGRAPHER

Michael Lavelle I.S.C. is an award winning cinematographer recently named by *Variety* as the 'rising star' of Irish cinema. He rose to early prominence as the cinematographer on the multi award winning short film *UNDRESSING MY MOTHER* which screened at Critics Week in Cannes and received a special mention at Sundance before garnering the European Academy Award for best short film in 2005.

His debut documentary feature film *HIS & HERS* Michael won the World Cinema Cinematography Award for Documentary at Sundance Film Festival in 2010. For *PATRICK'S DAY*, Michael was awarded the Haskell Wexler Award for Best Cinematography.

He has shot a wide range of material including horror films, political thrillers, children's movies and the hugely successful urban crime drama *CARDBOARD GANGSTERS*.

EMMANUELLE PUCCI – PRODUCTION DESIGNER

Emmanuelle Pucci is an art director and production designer, with an extensive body of work that includes *The Model* (2016), *The Smurfs 2* (2013), *Day of the Falcon* (2011), *Valley of Flowers* (2006), *Two Brothers* (2004) and *Samsara* (2001).

She has worked with many international directors in France, including Woody Allen and Agnes Varda. She is a bi-lingual architect by training who specialized in historical structures. As production designer, she previously worked with director Mary McGuckian on *Price of Desire* (2013), faithfully re-creating all of Eileen Gray's iconic designs on screen.

NATHALIE LEBORGNE - COSTUME DESIGNER

Nathalie Leborgne has worked as a costume designer since 1996, on films that include [Mr. Nobody](#) (2009), [Erased](#) (2012), [The Invader](#) (2011), and [The Treatment](#) (2014).

She has dressed many international stars - including Harvey Keitel, Christopher Lambert, Gérard Depardieu, Audrey Tautou, Jean Reno, and Bérénice Béjot - and worked with directors such as Sam Garbarski and Nicolas Provost.

Nathalie is a qualified fashion designer, having graduated from the National High School of Visual Art in Brussels, Belgium, in 1992. In 2012, she was awarded Best Costume Designer at Film Festival Oostende in Belgium.

NITIN SAWHNEY – MUSIC COMPOSER

Nitin Sawhney is one the most distinctive and versatile musical voices around today, achieving an international reputation across every possible creative medium.

In 2017 he received the Ivor Novello Lifetime Achievement award, and is firmly established as a world-class producer, songwriter, DJ, multi-instrumentalist, orchestral composer and cultural pioneer.

Sawhney has become a modern day 'Renaissance man in the worlds of music, film, videogames, dance and theatre. His endless creative curiosity makes him a formidable polymath across the whole artistic range of media associated with the music industry.

With over 20 studio albums to his name, including solo albums, film soundtracks and compilations, he has received a substantial wealth of major national and international awards for the work.

Sawhney has scored more than 50 films, most recently Andy Serkis' directorial debut 'Breathe' and 'Mowgli' a Warner Bros film acquired by Netflix for release in 2019 and again directed by Serkis.



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PRODUCTION COMPANY BIOGRAPHIES

UMEDIA

Umedia is a vertically integrated, international film group with 160 staff based in London, Brussels, Paris, Vancouver and Los Angeles. The company is one of Europe's leading production groups, combining the activities of development, production, financing, visual effects and finishing. Since its inception in 2004, Umedia has invested more than \$500 million via its tax shelter, equity and development funds, and has been involved in 350 films including GRACE OF MONACO, JOHN WICK, YVES SAINT LAURENT and multi-Academy Award-winning THE ARTIST. www.umedia.eu

Umedia is currently in production on a number of features including: I KILL GIANTS with Zoe Saldana, produced with Chris Columbus, and directed by Academy Award Winner Anders Walter; MANDY starring Nicolas Cage; SUBMERGENCE by Wim Wenders with Alicia Vikander and James McAvoy; Tom Wirkola's WHAT HAPPENED TO MONDAY with Glenn Close, Noomi Rapace and Williem Dafoe; JOURNEY'S END starring Sam Claflin and Paul Bettany; and the Daniel Alfredson's INTRIGO trilogy starring Ben Kingsley.

PEMBRIDGE

MARY MCGUCKIAN has been writing, producing and directing independent feature films for over twenty years. Pembroke Pictures is the development, finance and production entity Mary McGuckian uses to generate original material. Committed to dramatic story-telling from a female perspective, she continues to campaign for equal opportunities for women in the film industry and applauds the recent upsurge of attention to this issue. www.pembroke.pictures