

Ferdyn on Films, etc.

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[2009 Chicago International Film Festival](#)



The Athlete (Atletu, 2009)

Directors/Screenwriters: Davey Frankel and Rasselas Lakew

By Marilyn Ferdinand

This Sunday, October 11, the annual running of the Chicago Marathon will take place. Part of the route surrounds the theatre where the CIFF films are being shown, which will make it very difficult for moviegoers to navigate their way to any screenings before 5 p.m. (just another reason we shouldn't have gotten the 2016 Olympics—bad handling of multiple events and traffic). However, if any of this weekend's marathoners want some inspiration, CIFF has, like last year, booked a marathon-related film whose first screening will be the day before the big race. *The Athlete* is a biopic that tells in a rather unique way the story of Abebe Bikila, the Ethiopian who burst onto the world stage by winning the 1960 Olympic marathon race in Rome in his bare feet. Rasselas Lakew, in addition to cowriting and codirecting this film, also plays the lead, offering as much grace and internal fortitude as the real Bikila must have had to face the challenges his short life held for him.

The film opens with a striking close-up of Lakew as Bikila, his chin buried in a white fleece collar. He begins a narrative of his life as a can of film is opened and the film mounted and threaded through a projector. *The Athlete* moves backward and forward through time, as Bikila is shown going about his business or speaking to friends and people he meets—a strategy of both showing important incidents in Bikila's life and having Bikila or others relate them in a slightly awkward expository fashion that the actors, nonetheless, still seem to pull off fairly well.



About Me



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Bikila is a national hero. When he is stopped on the road leading from his home village of Jato to his current home in Addis Ababa for an identity check, he complies willingly and gives two bottles of honey to the soldiers at the checkpoint. One upbraids the other for stopping a great man like Bikila and then tells her that he has gotten honey from his home village to help heal his wounds. Bikila, after his historic wins in Rome—sweet victory in the land whose fascist regime had invaded his country in 1936 and sent him fleeing into the mountains—and in the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games only 5 weeks after having his appendix removed, was forced to drop out of the Mexico City race at the 18-mile mark due to injuries. He feels the pang of an unfinished race and hopes to compete in the 1972 Munich Games.



Bikila visits the training camp for Ethiopian athletes. The coach is skeptical about his return to form, but his old friend Onni (Dag Malmberg), a transplant to Ethiopia from Sweden, gives Bikila hope and tells him that he needs more rest between races now that he has gotten older and more injury-prone. Bikila had earlier encountered a horse that had been blinded and abandoned by an owner who no longer wanted it. He went out to shoot it before it was killed by hyenas, but changed his mind. "I met one who was at the end of the road. He could not see but his legs still had the will to carry him forward." This is Bikila in a nutshell.



The film is filled with quiet, poetic moments like this, often using parallel images to communicate the circle of life. For example, Bikila is in a car accident that sends his VW Beetle onto its side. Bikila lays on his back, half in half out of the car, looking at the sky until some men find him in the morning. The accident costs him the use of his legs, but his competitive drive takes him into archery and then into Norway's [Ridderrennet](#) cross-country sit-ski race—source of the opening close-up—in which he is pulled on a sled by dogs while he and an able-bodied man pole and steer. The sled goes out of control at one point and flips on its side. Bikila is again on his back looking at the sky. This time, however, Bikila sees the sun shine through a brief break in the clouds and insists on righting the sled himself. This is a subtle way to suggest that Bikila has progressed past the race he never finished and found grace in accepting his condition and the things he can do.

The film ends at the end of the screening of the film we saw being threaded onto the projector at the beginning of the film: sports documentarian Bud Greenspan's *The Ethiopian*. Emperor Haile Selassie, for whom Bikila had served as an Imperial guardsman, approaches Bikila to shake his hand as the dignitaries in the audience rise to give him a standing ovation. I was tempted to do the same myself.



The Athlete has created a new approach to biopics that finds a way to weave flashbacks into present time (even when the exposition feels a little stiff), suggest the beginnings of not only the circumstances, but also the character of its subject, and produce visual metaphors that are subtle and powerful. The landscapes of Ethiopia and Norway are breathtaking and woven into the story, the archival footage well chosen, and the use of music (I'm buying the soundtrack if I can) superb. If I were running on October 11, I'd want to watch this on October 10 to learn about the heart of a champion. †

***The Athlete* shows Saturday, October 10 at 5 p.m., Tuesday, October 13 at 7 p.m., and Saturday, October 17 at 12:20 p.m. Screenings will be held at the AMC River East 21, 322 E. Illinois St.**