

# World Film Festival: Running hard for Abebe

By JOHN GRIFFIN, The Gazette September 14, 2009



**Davey Frankel (right) and Rasselas Lakew on set in Sofia, Bulgaria. Lakew plays the role of Abebe Bikila in the film the Athlete.**

There is no film at the World Film Festival more unexpected or more satisfying than *Atletu* (The Athlete).

Davey Frankel and Rasselas Lakew's debut collaboration is a visually ravishing, revelatory mixed-medium narrative of the great Ethiopian marathon runner Abebe Bikila.

Seamlessly interweaving extensive footage from Bikila's miracle gold medals at the 1960 Rome and 1964 Tokyo Olympic games with recreated scenes starring Lakew as Bikila in the years after his triumph, *Atletu* chronicles Bikila's journey from national hero to tragedy, and back.

At once biopic, international travelogue, personal biography, drama and documentary, *Atletu* redresses the incredible story of the barefoot "innocent country boy" who broke records to become Africa's first gold medalist, and broke more when he came back four years later to do it again.

Because it's the Olympics, there is great archival material, and as an A-list editor, U.S. filmmaker Frankel makes full use of it. Ethiopian Lakew's contributions range from original idea, extensive research, development, script, and years of passionate commitment to give the "athlete of the millennium" his due, and he embodies Bikila in the final years of his life.

Frankel has been in town for the festival screenings of his collaboration, only the second since its world premiere at the 2009 Edinburgh International Film Festival in June, where it played to sold out crowds and won the Best of Fest audience award.

Lakew, however, is back in New York, so Frankel brings his considerable technical expertise to bear on a cellphone hookup so that his dear friend and creative partner will not be left out of an interview.

It's still a shaky connection, however, so Lakew gets in a few early quotes, then signs off.

"We met through mutual friends in New York," the former Division 1 NCAA tennis player at the University of Montana says over the speakerphone. It was a felicitous connection. Lakew was ready to make his film. Frankel was ready to capitalize on the time he'd spent in Kenya shooting a documentary, *Aserian Ake*, for his thesis at Amherst College in Massachusetts. "I came of age in Africa," he says.

"Ras understood where I was coming from as a filmmaker. I wanted to make this a movie about what a hero this guy was for Ras. It had to be true to his vision as an African."

Frankel is a New York aural-visual artist, now based in Berlin with his German partner and their two kids. His CV reads like a who's who of downtown NYC culture, running from working with music vid guru Jem Cohen and editing indie films under Ang Lee's Good Machine banner to creating the visual accompaniments to Tan Dun's *The Crouching Tiger Concerto*, with Yo-Yo Ma and Howard Shore's *the Lord of the Rings* symphony. The latter toured the world and played the High Lights Festival here in 2004.

A subsequent documentary, about water resource management in Kenya that Frankel made for the United Nations, brought him back to his first love and what would become *Atletu*.

"The film promo tag," he says, "is 'shot independently from the Arctic Circle to the Equator, with a crew representing 10 nations.' It's a global indie film." A global indie film that could have been made by David Lean - it's that quietly epic in scope and ambition, a 35-mm project all the way.

"We'd start shooting as soon as we raised some money. We shot in Norway, the most expensive place on Earth, before the script was even finished, in 2006. I made a trailer to raise more money, then we shot in Ethiopia in natural light in 2007. I made another trailer, we raised more money in 2008 and shot in Bulgaria, standing in for 1960s and 1970s London.

"It has been an amazing process and learning experience. People who have seen it have been really interested, and had very emotional responses."

There also have been responses from the indie arms of major Hollywood studios. Frankel and Lakew, however, are making them wait until they can see it on the big screen.

"It doesn't fit any box," Frankel explains. "It's not art house-y, and not Hollywood, either. But it seems to have mass appeal.

"I had someone come up after the Edinburgh screening and say, 'I'm at a point in my life where I really need courage. This movie gave it to me.' "

*Atletu (The Athlete)* screens in Ethiopia's Amharic language and English, with English subtitles, at *Quartier Latin*, Sunday, Sept. 6 at 7:20.

[jgriffin@thegazette.canwest.com](mailto:jgriffin@thegazette.canwest.com)

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