

[Skip to content](#) | [Reporter - Amharic Version](#) | [Contact Us](#) |
[Skip to 1st column](#)

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[Home](#) ▶ [Sections Blog](#) ▶ Foreigner to release film about Ethiopia

Foreigner to release film about Ethiopia



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The infant film industry in Ethiopia has seen many films of various genres making their way to big screens. The popularity of films is mainly driven by the fact that the films deal with local subject matter and are made in the local language. The huge turnout for locally made films has contributed to a large number of people venturing into the industry.

A soon to be addition to the films shot locally and dealing with subject matters close to home, a new feature length documentary is soon to make it to the screens. The film, with the working title "Abyssinia Rising", unlike other films we have seen so far, is produced and co-directed by a foreigner named Benjamin Mandell.

Ben became fascinated with Africa when he worked and traveled throughout southern Africa in 2006. During his stay he wrote about Africa and his experience and photographed extensively. His pictures generated interest and some of them were published.

Not satisfied with their ability to transmit what he was experiencing in Africa, Ben started to look for other medium of expression other than text and still pictures. He decided to pick up film and start learning. Back in the US, he started working behind the scene on television shows and gained some experience in some independent films part time. He was soon employed as a marketing manager for a documentary film distribution company through which he learned the business end of the film industry.

Realizing he didn't want to distribute films but make them, Ben started taking night classes in film production while exploring possible film ideas. One day in May, Ben heard of an unusual story about Ethiopia. It was getting ready to celebrate its third Millennium. As many people react when they hear of this country, which is celebrating this day seven years behind the rest of the world, Ben was immediately interested.

He soon started researching Ethiopian and the celebration. Not ever having set a foot in the country, he started from scratch. Determined to continue go forth with making his film in Ethiopia and faced with the paramount realities of making an independent film, Ben purchased the equipment he would need for the project with money he borrowed from family and with the credit card he had taken out.

Then came the challenge of finding people who would volunteer to work on the project. He found his first volunteer in Bethlehem Dejene who was making her way to Ethiopia for the celebration. He also hired Melissa Donovan, an award winning photographer with years of experience out of 20 applicants who responded to his ad.

He then came to Addis two weeks ahead of the New Year celebrations to learn more about the country and the culture. The film was shot at various locations in Ethiopia and abroad. It follows three individuals as they go about their daily lives.

Desalegn Goshu is an Ethiopian Jew whose family immigrated to Israel when he was twelve years-old. The film shows Desalegn as he was finishing up college in Israel and preparing for his first visit to Ethiopia since his departure fifteen years back. It shows as he arrives in Ethiopia and reconnects with his mother country, family and friends he had long since left and culminates in an emotional return to his rural childhood village.

Rick Hodes is an American doctor who lives in Ethiopia and is commonly referred to as "Father Theresa". Rick has spent the last twenty years providing free health care to the country's most destitute. Rick's work doesn't end at the clinic; he has also opened his home to Ethiopian children in tough situations, legally adopting five and housing, feeding and educating many more. In addition, Rick fundraises and sends dozens of children who can't be helped locally for major surgeries to other countries including the U.S., Ghana and India.

Yewoinshet "Woiny" Masresha is a strong and compassionate woman who once spent three years in solitary confinement in prison because she refused to marry a DERG official. For more than twelve years, Woiny has made it her responsibility to care for thousands of H.I.V./A.I.D.S. affected children. Previously traumatized, stigmatized and near death, her children have made unbelievable recoveries and become academic and social leaders in their communities.

Ben says, by portraying these three unique individuals through the symbolic connection to the millennium, he hopes to show how they represent the future, a new hope and promise so many are looking for.

The film is shot with a Sony HDV camera and used high-end portable battery-driven lights. The film is expected to be released in the middle of 2008 and will be screened at international film festivals right away. Ben says that he wants to make an Amharic version of the film to make it available to many people in Ethiopia. As the film is self-financed, Ben says he needs to first secure the distribution support from the US to be able to continue with the Amharic version.

MAIN MENU

[Home](#)
[Sections Blog](#)
[Reporter - Amharic Version](#)
[Contact Us](#)

SECTIONS

[News](#)
[Editorial](#)
[Business & Economy](#)
[Law](#)
[Interview](#)
[By the Way](#)
[Politics](#)
[Opinion](#)
[Life & Art](#)
[Sport](#)

Shot in the various locations in Ethiopia like Addis Ababa, Axum, Harar, Dire Dawa, the film features a number of other people in addition to the three main characters, including the president Girma Woldegiorgis, Haile Gebreselassie and reggae artist Luciano.

By Hailu T.

[< Prev](#)

[Next >](#)

[\[BACK \]](#)

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