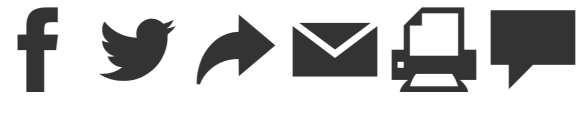




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# Hubert Sauper flies into South Sudan's reality in 'We Come as Friends'



Hubert Sauper is the documentary filmmaker behind "We Come as Friends," which won an award for cinematic bravery at the Sundance Film Festival. (Sundance Institute)

By **KENNETH TURAN, LOS ANGELES TIMES FILM CRITIC**

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Documentary filmmakers are known to go to extraordinary lengths to get their stories on film, but few have gone as far as Hubert Sauper.

In order to achieve the unusual access to the reality of Africa he provides in his exceptional "We Come as Friends," which premiered last month at Sundance in Park City, Utah, and is screening Saturday at the Berlin International Film Festival, Sauper flew into the continent on a tiny ultra-light airplane he built himself.

"That's why these films take me so long — there are so many detours," the filmmaker says of the two years it took him to construct the small aircraft on a farm he owns in France's Burgundy region. "But I wanted to be able to land on small fields in military-controlled areas where I never would have been able to go by invitation. The plane was sort of a bluff, a Trojan horse that fell from the sky." It's no wonder "We Come as Friends" won Sundance's World Cinema Documentary Special Jury Prize for Cinematic Bravery.

## ON LOCATION: Where the cameras roll

A smart, funny and intense man who throws ideas and insights at you so fast that it's hard to keep up, Sauper is best known for another Africa-themed documentary, 2004's "Darwin's Nightmare," which offered an unblinking picture of societal collapse caused by state-sanctioned predatory capitalism as it plays out in the African nation of Tanzania.

Nominated for the documentary feature Oscar, "Darwin's Nightmare" didn't win, a situation that surprised Sauper not at all. "It was too much for those people, they said 'I like the penguins,'" he notes dryly about that year's victory of "March of the Penguins." "I make the opposite of feel-good movies: I make feel-bad movies."

A provocative and unapologetically political filmmaker, Sauper gets inside situations more deeply than most directors. No one sees the things he sees, no one makes the connections his thoughtful, challenging films come up with. With "We Come as Friends," Sauper returns to the subject of Africa, this time using the 2011 referendum that broke South Sudan off from Sudan as his starting point. It's a film, he said as he introduced it in Park City, about "globalization, colonialism, imperialism. It's the biggest gamble in my life, the hardest assignment I ever gave myself."

Talking at breakfast a few days later, Sauper said he likes to film in Africa because "it is more transparent, more accessible, more brutal, more ironic. If you did a film on capitalism centered on Wall Street, all you would be able to film is computer screens. Africa's ambient chaos is something I can blend into."

## PHOTOS: Behind the scenes of movies and TV

The first thing that attracted Sauper about flying his own plane into Africa was the power of the metaphor involved. "Many of the threads that have to do with capitalism lead to this machine," he explains. "It's a violent machine used to drop bombs, it connects with the Christian value of peace from above, it represents the superiority of white people. It has all these terrifying, beautiful implications."

More than that, flying in enabled Sauper to in a sense meet Africa on its own terms. "The plane was our LSD, it let us literally be high," he says, laughing. "We were so high on our own craziness that we were able to penetrate crazy environments with our counter-craziness.

"We embraced anarchy as a concept and people were paralyzed at our appearance.... You have to make good friends quickly or you are doomed. If you are in an over-regulated area, they either kill you or you are free."

Not that things were easy on the two-year trip Sauper undertook with his friend and cinematographer Barney Broomfield, only a portion of which made it into the film. "We were held for a month in Libya, not in prison but not allowed to leave, and in Egypt too," the director says, which led to yet another stratagem.

"We reasoned that it was so hard to get through to the authorities because we wore T-shirts, we didn't have the uniform of pilots," Sauper explains. "We decided we were going to become five-star captains. We bought uniforms, we became more formal in our address to soldiers who stopped us when we landed, we demanded to speak to their officers. It was a total bluff, right, but it was successful."

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Some of the scenes Sauper shows are such that, as he says, "behind the camera your jaw is dropping." We hear a confused South Sudanese elder trying to explain how he unwittingly signed away the rights to 600,000 hectares of communal land, see Chinese technicians running a huge oil facility which is likely poisoning the water of nearby villagers, watch American missionaries handing out solar-powered talking Bibles and trying to trade education for Christian obedience.

Sauper's uncompromising attitude has led to problems in the past. After "Darwin's Nightmare" got that Oscar nomination, the government of Tanzania attacked him with full force, a frightening situation that will be the subject of Sauper's next documentary, to be called "Autopsy of a Nightmare."

"It took years of my life. There were many death threats, lawsuits; people had to be evacuated from the country — they became refugees for having been in my movie," the director explains. And there was more.

"There were cyber attacks against me, fake photos showing [Osama] bin Laden and Hubert hugging, Saddam Hussein and Hubert. The government organized rallies in Tanzania, thousands of people marching and chanting 'down with the filmmaker who makes us look bad.' I was very alone for a number of years."

Despite his penchant for provoking those in power, Sauper says, "I don't want to be an anti-imperialism spokesman." What he views himself as is a storyteller. "The best thing you can do as an artist is to share passion," he explains. "That's all I do."

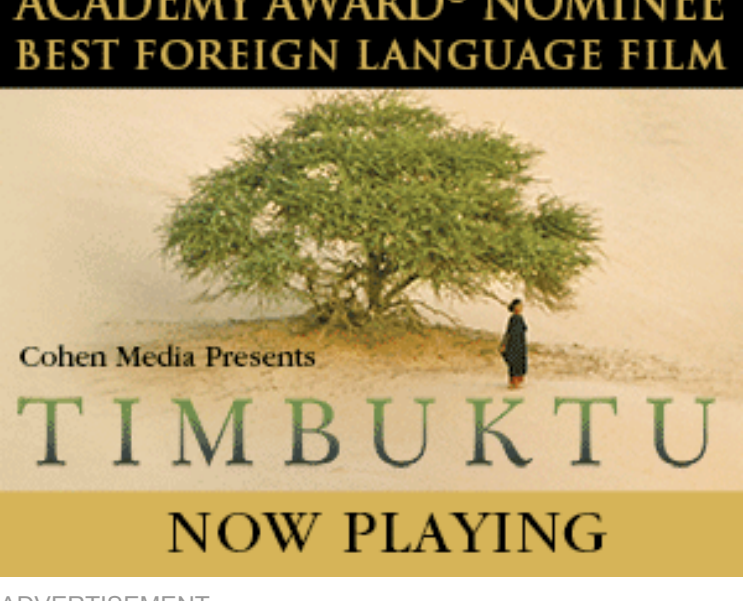
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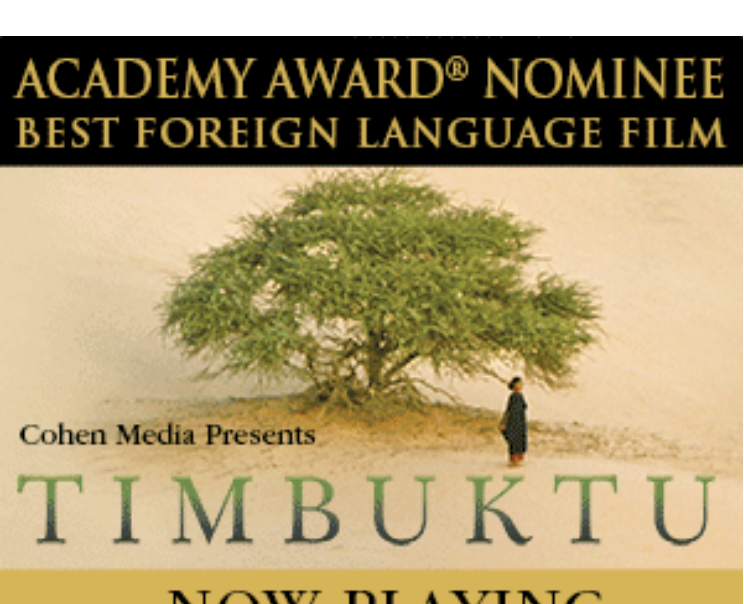
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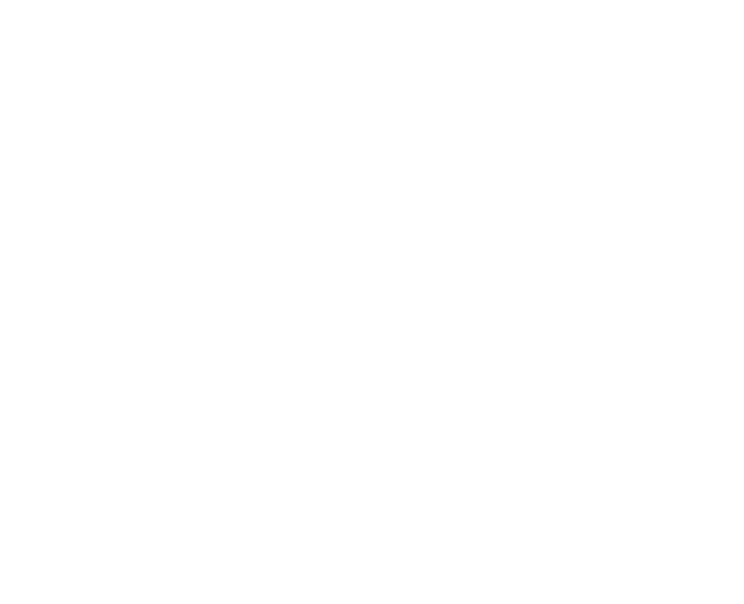
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