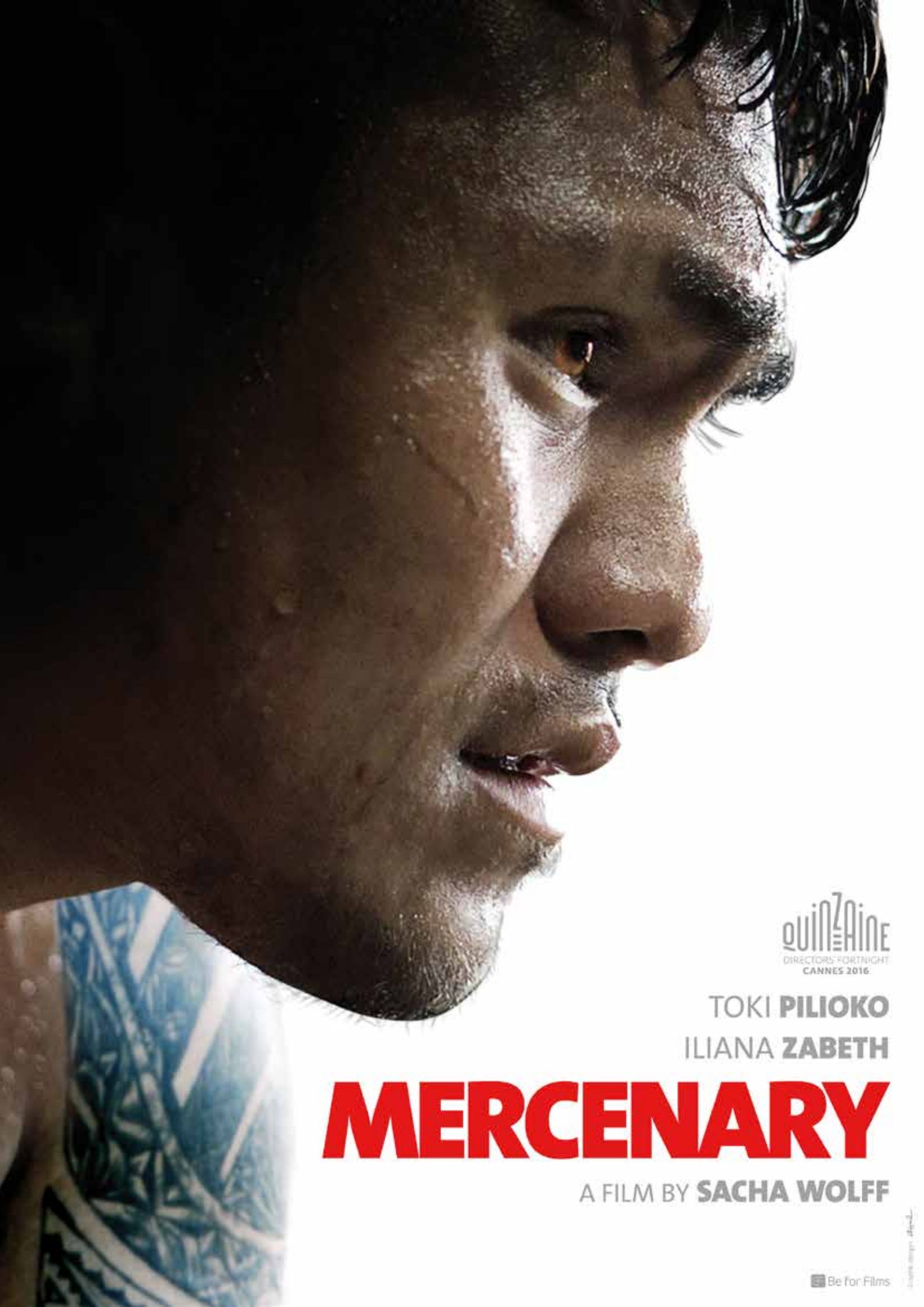




QUINZE
AINE
DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT
CANNES 2016

TOKI PILIOKO
ILIANA ZABETH

MERCENARY

A FILM BY SACHA WOLFF

Be for Films

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MERCENARY

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SYNOPSIS

Soane, a young man of **Wallisian** origin from New Caledonia, defies his father's authority to go play rugby in France. Left to his own devices on the other side of the world, his odyssey will take him on the path to becoming a man in a world where there is a price to be paid for success.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

It is said that Africa is the forgotten continent. Oceania is the invisible continent. Invisible, because the first to venture there hadn't noticed it and because today it remains a place without international recognition, a place of passage; in a way, an absence.

J.M.G. Le Clézio. *Raga*.

Mercenary is the story of a young man from New Caledonia of Wallisian origin who leaves everything behind to try his luck in France as a rugby player. French without being regarded as such, an eternal foreigner, Soane thirsts for freedom. He's a figure who is struggling to obtain an evasive recognition.

A coming of age story, **Mercenary** is the story of an initiation in a world where there is a price to be paid for success.



STRONGLY ROOTED IN DOCUMENTARY SOURCES

The idea for the project came from an article in *Le Monde* discussing the Lons-Le-Saunier team: the team, which is part of the Fédérale 2, French rugby's fourth championship division, has fifteen-or-so foreign professional players who were hired to help the other members of the team – all amateur players – reach the next division. As far as worldwide rugby economics are concerned, France is the biggest spender. Although there is a great deal of media coverage concerning the hiring of foreign professional players by France's thirty professional clubs, very little is known about the hundreds of amateur teams whose precarious financial situation shapes the daily lives of these immigrant workers. They are modern day *ronin*, wandering samurai in search of playing contracts, offering their services to the highest bidder.

While documenting the subject matter, I came across a wide array of players, coaches and team managers, and quickly became fascinated with the situation of players from Oceania. But, in particular, my research took a decisive turn when I meet Paki, a New Caledonian prop forward of Wallisian origin. I then decided that instead of talking about foreign workers, I would focus on these French people who come from elsewhere.

After a trip to New Caledonia, where I was given an inside look at the Wallisian community, I started writing. Three central issues, all related, guided me in the development of the screenplay as well as the staging of the film: freedom and the weight of tradition, family and fatherhood, the subjection of the body through violence.

COWBOY WITH A REDSKIN FACE

At the beginning, Soane takes advantage of the chance he has been offered to leave his father whose violence he has been subjected to since childhood. Soane is looking to free himself from this domination and seizes the opportunity given to him by Abraham, a former rugby player who has become a sports agent.

All of the players that I met experienced their departure like a *one-way trip*. As if their fate was sealed, they said a final good-bye to their families, their origins and their traditions. The film begins thus so, like a mission: we find a ronin and offer him a contract that will have repercussions and dramatic consequences for him. While I have samurai films like *Yojimbo* or *Sanjuro* by Kurosawa in mind, I am also referring to Westerns by Clint Eastwood, such as *Unforgiven*. For me, Soane is a solitary cowboy with a redskin face.

Soane craves the freedom that is denied him. But he is also endeavoring to exist in his father's eyes. Léoné, the father, only sees Soane as a "lazy shit." Soane secretly hopes that his father will see who he really is one day. And more. Soane wants to take his father's place. It is the reason why he is so attached to Coralie, and to this child who is probably not his: he dreams of being a father too.

VIOLENCE AS A MEANS TO AN END

Soane is ready to do anything at the beginning so that his *kingdom will come*; but he doesn't yet understand that he will have to give himself over to the same violence that his father subjected him to. This violence first comes from his job: his body has to push, pull, exert pressure, strike and absorb shock. His body is too big, too fat, he breaks his bed, can't fit into cars; he is ill-adapted to our universe. His body has to be controlled and subjected to transformation for the inhuman service it is being submitted to.

Little by little his body undergoes a metamorphosis: fat gives way to muscle. Thus the violence works within him; slowly kindled it explodes in the last part of the film.

The question never was for me to praise the cult of the body. Rather than putting Soane on the right path, as Abraham promises, the sport feeds and builds up his violent behavior. Today, even if every amateur club strives for professionalism and their management models are similar to that of businesses, the rugby men are placed in rivaling situations and the schedules imposed for them to transform and have absolute control of their bodies are extreme. Illegal drug use is generalized and Soane is no exception in that respect. For him, there are no morals, there is just his mission, and he is ready to take full control of his anatomy, even if it has to be done through artificial means, and as quickly as possible.



TATTOOS AND THE THREE-LEGGED DOG

The trajectory of Soane's journey is also conditioned by History, which haunts the relationship between the Oceanians and the former colonizers, the Europeans. His ambivalent relationship with Abraham, who goes from protector and savior to unscrupulous smuggler and blackmailer, works along these lines and illustrates the complexity of adapting Polynesian traditional values to Western values. Rugby men today are heirs to the descendants of *blackbirding* victims, people subjected to disguised slavery by white boat captains who captured and forced them to work as slaves in unhuman conditions all over the world.

Soane is caught up in the specter of this History, in the desire that his *exotic* morphology arouses. But it is especially impossible for him to escape the violence of his childhood and youth. With Abraham's return, it's the whole past that he left behind which resurfaces

The threat of this past which haunts him is sustained by the memory of the three-legged dog; the ghost of a truth that he is trying to forget, like a tattoo that can never be removed. Soane's stay in France mirrors what he experienced in New Caledonia. He is housed in a bungalow that resembles his father's squat. He is subjected to Abraham's domination over him, just as he was subjected to Léoné's. He believes he is responsible for a child, just as he would like to be able to take care of his little brother who he gave up in order to leave. Everything he thought he'd escaped reemerges and catches up with him.



OUTSTANDING **ACTORS**

The protagonist and world that I have chosen to depict implied that I would be working for the most part with non-professional actors. I wanted to film the truth about rugby men's bodies, which are altered in too specific of a way to be faked on screen. And this truth provokes an inimitable emotion. In order to faithfully reflect the violence and commitment that I had imagined, the game sequences could only be shot with real players.

Some roles are played by actors, Coralie in particular, who clings to Soane during his time in France. She embodies the love and gentleness that Soane aspires to, but which he is obstinately denied. Soane, arriving in France, is looking to find a family. His ideal family is what he dreams of building with Coralie.

Although in writing the screenplay I consciously distanced myself from the documentary to allow the fiction to find its full scope, I kept a documentary-like, almost neorealist approach for the film shoot. Natural settings were favored, shots of the stadium's stands were filmed with real fans, and the partygoers at the get-together in Soane's honor at the squat are the actual people who live there.

A STYLIZED DIRECTION TO SUPPORT THE NARRATIVE

However, I didn't look for naturalism in the staging, but rather for something stylized, notably in the work on the body. All of the game sequences are filmed from Soane's point of view. The camera remains on the field, with him. I favored a camera on a mount, and tried to free myself from the naturalistic premise that is connoted by a handheld camera.

Thus, I attached myself to Soane's POV, always. This rule in fact goes for the entire film. Every sequence is taken from his height, from his side. Some information (like the team's financial problems, drug use) is treated exclusively through Soane's experience and understanding of the situation.

Although rugby is very present in the film since it defines Soane's mission, **Mercenary** isn't a film about sports. I tried to make sure that the sport sequences directly depended upon what was at stake for Soane; the team's results aren't crucial to the screenplay's evolution. It is this direction that also determined how the games would be filmed. I had to detach myself from television codes of how to film rugby matches.

I see rugby as the equivalent of boxing, but as a team, and I propose the same dramatic aspects. The commitment that practicing rugby implies allowed me to physically translate – in movement – the problems Soane is confronted with. In reference to *Fat City*, John Huston said: *"the boxer isn't like a gambler who wagers his money. The boxer gambles himself. His chances for 'success' are very limited. In theory, we are all fighters, we are all manhandled. Fighting means surviving."*

A MYTHICAL TRAGEDY

What interests me in Soane's journey is that it contains a part of myth; it refers to narrative outlines that are close to parables, great biblical narratives, but also forgotten Polynesian mythology. Stories of pioneering voyages are an integral part of the culture of these people who, isolated on minuscule islands in the planet's largest ocean, frequently set out on sea adventures, just following the stars. In **Mercenary**, this relationship with myth is pivotal.

Music plays a decisive role in this project. In Wallisian culture, it is part of daily life. Music accompanies every event the community goes through. For me, it offers a counterpoint to the narrative, as does the chorus of a Greek tragedy. An elegy sung in honor of lost heroes, working songs sung by rural workers, ceaselessly-recited prayers that are learned-by-heart, music is one of the last remnants of the original Polynesian traditions.

AN UNCHARTERED FILM GENRE: OCEANIAN CINEMA

I mentioned that I had samurai and Western films in mind. In reality, the genre I was looking for is another kind. It seems essential to me to be able to make this *Oceanian* film exist, whose codes and protagonists have been *invisible* in cinema, literature and art in general.

Making Soane a hero means venturing down a virgin path of cinematography; it means making *visible* and giving voice to the problematic issues of a poorly known and secret world. It means confronting a genre that isn't one as such, because it has never yet been represented, but nevertheless a genre which I am convinced has an infinitely rich cinema to offer.

Sacha Wolff



DIRECTOR'S BIO

Sacha Wolff has directed several award-winning short films selected for a number of international film festivals. A graduate of the Fémis School of cinema, he also pursues documentary film-making, which fuels and enriches his fiction work. **Mercenaire**, his first feature film, notably received the Gan Foundation Award in 2014.

CAST

SOANE **TOKI PILIOKO**
CORALIE **ILIANA ZABETH**
ABRAHAM **LAURENT PAKIHIVATAU**
SOSEFO **MIKAELE TUUGAHALA**
LEONE **PETELO SEALEU**
TOMASI **MAONI TALALUA**
EPIPHANIA **TEOTOLA MAKI**
VASSIL **BESSARION UDESANI**
ANGELO **OMAR HASAN**
JOACHIM **MATHIAS DUFAUD**
M. BLANC **DOMINIQUE POZZER**

CREW

DIRECTOR **SACHA WOLFF**
SCREENPLAY **SACHA WOLFF**
PHOTOGRAPHY **SAMUEL LAHU**
SOUND **JULIEN SICART**
EDITOR **LAURENCE MANHEIMER**
SOUND EDITORS **LUC MEILLAND – SARAH LELU**
MUSIC **LUC MEILLAND**
DELEGATE PRODUCER **CLAIRE BODECHON – TIMSHEL PRODUCTIONS**
DELEGATE PRODUCER **JEAN BREHAT – 3B PRODUCTIONS**
DELEGATE PRODUCER **RACHID BOUCHAREB – 3B PRODUCTIONS**
IN CO-PRODUCTION WITH **ARTE FRANCE CINÉMA**

TECHNICAL DETAILS

SHOOTING FORMAT: HD

SOUND: 5.1

RATIO: SCOPE (2.35)

RUNNING TIME: 103'

ORIGINAL VERSION: FRENCH AND WALLISIAN

SUBTITLES: ENGLISH

YEAR OF PRODUCTION: 2016



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