

# JOY

A FILM BY SUDABEH MORTEZAI



## **JOY**

FICTION FEATURE • AUSTRIA 2018 • 101 MIN • DCP • 1:1.85 • DOLBY 5.1 • OV PIDGIN, ENGLISH, GERMAN



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DAS RAUCHEN DES  
KRAUTS, JOINTS SCHNEE  
MARIJUANA SIND  
STRAFT UNERLAUBT  
UND VERBOTEN  
DANK

MARIJUANA ARE  
HEREBY PROHIBITED  
THANKS

*Joy is a young Nigerian woman caught in the vicious cycle of sex trafficking. She walks the streets to pay off debts to her exploiter Madame, while supporting her family in Nigeria and hoping for a better life for her little daughter in Vienna. Joy struggles to understand her role in this merciless system of exploitation when she is instructed by Madame to supervise Precious, a teenage girl fresh from Nigeria who is not ready to accept her fate.*





## SYNOPSIS

Joy and Precious are Nigerian women walking the streets in Vienna. Joy is the older and more experienced one, Precious only a teenager and a novice fresh from Nigeria. They both work for Madame, their pimp and exploiter who has paid their journey to Europe and makes them pay off the debts with an iron fist. They live in a cramped flat with a group of other women, all of them Madame's girls. Madame comes every week to collect the money and controls every aspect of their lives. The women's everyday life is confined to work on the streets, few private moments in the apartment and weekly visits to the African Pentecostal church that gives them a sense of community. There is a kind of sisterhood in their shared fate and suffering but no real solidarity as every woman is fighting on her own to pay off and finally be free.

For Joy freedom seems within reach. She is almost done paying off her debts when Madame instructs her to supervise Precious and break her in. Precious is recalcitrant, not ready to accept her fate yet but Joy needs to make her work. Otherwise Madame will hold her accountable for Precious' performance and make Joy pay for her. This pushes Joy into a double position of victim and accomplice. But this is how the trafficking system works. Everyone is an accomplice. Everyone fights their own fight. "In this game, it's the survival of the fittest." is Joy's advice to Precious. Eat or be eaten. Joy wants to make it at any cost, even if she has to sacrifice Precious.



Joy has a little daughter to support as well as a family back home who she regularly sends money to. And with no visa or working permit and the possibility of deportation looming over her, Joy is in a precarious situation. Against all hardships and setbacks, she keeps her eyes on the goal: to be finally free and able to make a better life for herself and her little daughter, who is in the meantime living with a foster family.

And the johns come and go, some indifferent, some benign, others violent, real brutes. "We don't look at their faces" is how Joy makes this life bearable. There is one guy though who raises hopes of a quick exit. Christian, a regular who seems like a nice decent guy. He offers to pay Joy's remaining debts and set up a home for her and her daughter. But Joy needs the money to pay for an expensive medical treatment for her sick father. Christian's generosity vanishes quickly when he realizes that he cannot fulfill his "Pretty Woman" fantasy. And Joy is on her own again. So the vicious circle never stops and freedom once again moves further away. But Joy keeps fighting and working her way towards her goal. With no other options, freedom only means to keep working as a prostitute or, if she is lucky, become a Madame herself.







## **DIRECTOR'S NOTE**

Tens of thousands of Nigerian women walk the streets and work in brothels all over Europe. They are victims of an elaborate trafficking system, a kind of modern day slavery forcing them to pay off horrendous debts. When I first read about Nigerian sex trafficking, what surprised and shocked me most was that there are no male pimps involved. The trafficking business is run almost entirely by women. It's women exploiting other women. The "Madames" are former prostitutes, once victims of trafficking themselves, who after paying off their debts, save money to buy new girls and bring them to Europe for sex work. A vicious cycle that blurs the lines between exploiters and victims.

What drives a woman who has experienced this kind of abuse to become a perpetrator herself? At what cost does freedom and personal well-being come? What is the role of the families and society in all of this? And is there a way out? Driven by these questions I started to explore this merciless system and the exploration ultimately lead me to Benin City, Nigeria, where the majority of the women comes from. I started to understand the life stories and circumstances of these women and develop more and more empathy with them. Also it became increasingly difficult for me to make judgments about good and evil in this game. And this is what I would like the audience to feel and experience, too. See the world through the eyes of a woman who sees no other option that to participate in this perfidious system, experience her story with her, from her perspective.

I wanted to make a film that gives an intimate and authentic glimpse into the lives of trafficked women and to show them as subjects of their own stories. JOY reveals what we rarely see: the private moments, the everyday struggles, the complex power dynamics, the strength and dignity of these foreign women walking Europe's streets and red-light districts. The film's point of view is completely through the eyes of Joy. It's her journey and her relationship with her Madame and newcomer Precious that drive the story. There is no "white savior." The johns, the nice guys as well as the brutes, remain minor characters.

I wrote JOY's screenplay incorporating many real life stories I encountered in my research. I always shoot in chronological order and let the actors improvise as much as possible within the framework of the script, leaving them a lot of space to develop their characters and relationships, to have their own way of talking and interacting with each other. So, in a way my actors are my co-authors and it is in no small part thanks to them that JOY has the intimacy and immediacy that I find necessary to tell this story.





## INTERVIEW

You have chosen to set your second feature film, JOY, against the background of particularly perfidious human trafficking, a system where women from Nigeria live in an endless loop of dependency and lack of solidarity. Could you briefly describe the cycle women like your main protagonist Joy find themselves in?

*It was the very perfidious nature of the system which attracted me to the subject. Whenever the subject of sex workers is raised, an initial reflex is to ask: „Where are the men who are exploiting these women?“ Naturally men, as clients or henchmen, are always involved. But what if it is women who exploit the female sex workers – and what if these women have themselves been sex workers? What shocked me (and interested me in particular as the theme for a film) was the fact that in the Nigerian women trafficking system, the victims and the perpetrators are all women, all complicit. A system has been established whereby women who themselves were victims of human trafficking, as soon as they have succeeded in paying off their „debts“ of between €50,000 and €60,000 as prostitutes, pursue one goal: to turn the tables and become „madams“ themselves, getting girls who have just arrived to work for them. The freedom they have purchased does not lead to any solidarity; it only provides them with the opportunity to become women who profit from the system.*

How was it possible for you to gain an overall impression of this system of sex work in Europe, and then to understand the everyday life of these women? After all, your film is characterized by its extreme proximity to reality.

*In the beginning it wasn't easy to establish a point of contact. First I read about the subject, and then I tried to meet women who were involved. Initially it was really difficult to conduct research in the red light district, until I realized that the women were extremely afraid of getting into difficulties if they spoke to me. I then changed tactics and tried to make contact with women who had escaped and were no longer immediately involved. Casting the film was my second step, and it was really a continuation of the research. At that point a lot of women opened up and told me their stories. Like Macondo, JOY is based on extremely thorough research. It's fictionalised in that the women do not enact their own stories but play roles; however, they are very familiar with this world, partly from their own experience. To a certain extent they are co-authors of the film, because the screenplay included a lot of their personal contributions.*

The casting took place in Vienna. How willing were these women to take part in this kind of project? Did you encounter any taboos due to their personal involvement?

*I wanted to work in particular with women who had direct knowledge of the situation, from their own experience. And I resolved not to say anything at all about the private lives of the women I worked with. The relationship they have with sex work is not the same for all the women, and I very deliberately left that open. Our casting call was formulated in an extremely general way. I then informed the people who came to auditions myself what the film would be about, and I was quite prepared for shocked or indignant reactions. Surprisingly, that only happened in one instance. In every respect I encountered a great deal of openness,*

*which was a real gift. The only women who were not open were those who were still immediately involved in the working situation. Which is quite understandable, because for them it was a safety risk.*

How did you work with your non-professional actors to prepare them for their parts and in particular for the relationships of the women to one another?

*I'm absolutely convinced that for my mode of working, casting is the decisive step. If the casting is done well, the characters fit together properly, and you place them in the right situations together, it automatically becomes interesting. I am confident about that. There was a screenplay, a clear dramaturgy and scenes, but it was only during the improvisation that the film really came into being. This time I wrote even less dialogue than for Macondo; instead I formulated a kind of declaration of intent showing which direction the scene should go in. I wanted to see for myself where the scene would lead the actors. They did get instructions from me as a director, but I was always very open to whatever they wanted to do with the scene.*

There are two scenes featuring extreme male violence: at one point Precious is raped by the Madam's henchmen, with all the other women of the house present and nobody able to help her. The second time Joy is abducted by a client and subjected to group rape. What were your thoughts about the subject of depicting violence?

*The subjects of prostitution and sexualised violence naturally raised some very fundamental questions of*



*what I wanted to depict, and how. You have to be aware that there is always the danger of turning the women into objects even more by depicting such things on film. Naturally what you show is a very tricky balancing act; I want the audience to appreciate how bad conditions are while at the same time avoiding the women becoming victims yet again. I put a great deal of thought into this question, and the two scenes you have mentioned are my answers. I structured the rape scene, where the audience is forced to be present, in such a way that we as an audience are not there for the act of rape; we remain with the women who are witnesses and thus become accomplices. I wanted the audience to experience along with these women what it's like to be trapped and forced into a complicit relationship, without any power to intervene.*

For this film did you once again shoot in chronological sequence and provide the actors with very little of the screenplay in advance?

*As a matter of principle I always work chronologically, although during the editing we did slightly change the position of a few things, and I didn't give anybody a complete screenplay to read. I asked the actors to trust me and allow themselves to be surprised by the way the story developed. I don't want people to know at the beginning of filming how their relationships will progress, and how the film ends, because that way they construct the relationships themselves and inhabit their roles even more. The women developed an incredible amount of details in the film themselves, and they defined for themselves the relationships they would have to one another. I only had advance conversations with Precious and her family: at the time we*



*were shooting she was just 17, and for ethical reasons I had to communicate certain scenes to her clearly and tell her how I planned to film them.*

There is one long scene at a Sunday Mass in the Nigerian community in Vienna. To what extent are you attempting here to depict something of the normality of these women's lives, to show that despite the work they perform, they are part of a community? Or are you also playing with hypocrisy, suggesting that everybody is aware of these women's fate but acts as though nothing untoward were happening?

*I'm trying to do both things. Religion plays an important part in the lives of the Nigerian women; most of those I met, whatever their social standing, would never miss Sunday Mass. It's a firm fixture in their everyday lives. Many of the women I dealt with felt that the Christian religion helped them escape from the power of Juju, a kind of voodoo cult, by providing them with a different spiritual force that gave them strength. Naturally I'm also interested in the hypocrisy here, because everybody knows who the Madam is and who the exploited women are. Everyone knows each other: it's an open secret. I wanted to portray this scene with its ambivalence, without making any comment. It was only during my travels around Nigeria that I came to appreciate the impossibility of adopting moral standards unless you are in a reasonable social and economic situation. It's easy for us in Europe, with our privileged position, to be indignant about a woman who is inflicting upon another woman the suffering she herself has experienced. But that isn't due to a failure to comprehend good and evil; it's because there is no other way out.*



The film begins with a long sequence depicting a ritual which each of these young women has to submit to before setting off from Nigeria to Europe. Why did you choose this introduction?

*The Juju ritual is enormously important in this power structure as a mechanism of control over these women. Juju, also known as voodoo, is extremely widespread in West Africa. There are a large number of shrines dedicated to various divinities. In the context of human trafficking, it involves an oath being sworn which is the equivalent of a binding contract. The women who are recruited in Nigeria have to swear they will pay off their debts and will never cooperate with the police. Small quantities of blood, hair, fingernails, etc, are taken from them and stored in the shrine. The women fear that if they do not adhere to this oath, they will die or become sick or insane, or members of their family could suffer. It is a crucial instrument of power, and it has to be shown as such in the film. At the same time, I wanted the focus of the film to be in Europe. That's why I use a kind of parentheses, with the beginning and the end of the film set in Nigeria, and the main action taking place in Austria.*

What status do these women have back home, if they decide to return to Nigeria after paying off their debts?

*If they come back empty handed, they are despised by their families. It's extremely brutal. Everybody sticks their heads in the sand and refuses to acknowledge what these women have been through. The main thing is that they send money home. A representative of NAPTIP, the state organization in Nigeria that works to*

*combat human trafficking, told us that the women who are deported from Europe immediately try to get back there. The only real way they can return to Nigeria is if they bring money. And if they manage to do that, the stigma of prostitution is no longer attached to them. Then they are able to marry and have families. They are regarded as successful women. I made a conscious decision to tell the story of a woman who does everything she possibly can to succeed within the system, only for this to mark the beginning of a downward spiral for her. If we want to debate the subject on a different level, we would have to discuss why we in Europe live so well, and which people have to suffer so that we can maintain our standard of living. Because everything is connected. The corrupt social systems where women like those in my film exist, without any means of escape, have not come about in a vacuum. And we are not only talking here about the history of colonialism but also the way exploitation of natural resources has proceeded ever since. In the global system we would all like to have everything and consume whatever we want – but we don't want to know anything about the people involved. Seen from this perspective, the fate of these people involves us all.*

Interview: Karin Schiefer for AUSTRIAN FILM COMMISSION  
August 2018







## SUDABEH MORTEZAI BIOGRAPHY

Born 1968 in Ludwigsburg, Germany, to Iranian parents, Sudabeh Mortezaei grew up in Tehran and Vienna. She received her MA in theater and film studies from the University of Vienna in 1994. She worked as a programmer for film festivals and organized a number of film events as the manager and curator of Filmcasino, an independent arthouse theater in Vienna. After completing UCLA's certificate program in Film, TV, and Digital Entertainment Media in 2003, she worked as an assistant director and production manager and directed and produced several short films before making her feature-length documentary "Children of the Prophet". She made her feature debut in 2014 with „Macondo“ which premiered in competition at the Berlinale 2014 and garnered numerous international awards, including the „Firebird Award“ for Best Film at the Hong Kong International Film Festival and the „Vienna Film Award“ at the Viennale.

## FILMOGRAPHY

2018 - JOY

2014 – MACONDO

Berlinale 2014 - Official competition  
Hong Kong IFF 2014 - Firebird Award  
Cinema Europeo 2014 - Cineuropa Award & Best Script  
Karlovy Vary IFF 2014 - Variety Critics' Choice  
Sarajevo Film Festival 2014 - CICA Award  
BFI London Film Festival 2014 - First Feature Competition  
Haifa IFF 2014 - Filmmakers of tomorrow  
Mumbai Film Festival 2014 - International Competition  
Viennale 2014 - Vienna Film Award

2009 – IN THE BAZAR OF THE SEXES (doc)

Viennale 2009  
Nomination Best Austrian Documentary 2011  
DOCSEF México 2010 - Best International Documentary  
Vision du Reel Nyon 2010  
Dokfest München 2010

2006 – CHILDREN OF THE PROPHET (doc)

IDFA – Int. Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam 2007  
First Appearance (Competition)

## FREIBEUTERFILM

In 2007 FreibeuterFilm was founded by film editor and producer Oliver Neumann, directors Sudabeh Mortezaï and Sebastian Meise and producer & production manager Sabine Moser. Their intention was to create a platform for innovative, personal projects in the areas of creative documentaries and fiction film.

FreibeuterFilm wants to create a space for innovative films with attitude. We are driven by passion for filmmaking, curiosity about humans and their stories, a desire for visual storytelling, and socially relevant subjects.

[www.freibeuterfilm.com](http://www.freibeuterfilm.com)

### FILMOGRAPHY (SELECTION)

#### 2018

JOY (FICTION, DIR. SUDABEH MORTEZAI)  
TO THE NIGHT (FICTION, DIR. PETER BRUNNER)

#### 2017

TESTAMENT (FICTION, DIR. AMICHAÏ GREENBERG)

#### 2016

HIDDEN RESERVES (FICTION, DIR. VALENTIN HITZ)  
SEEING VOICES (DOCUMENTARY, DIR. DARIUSZ KOWALSKI)  
HOUSE OF ATONEMENT (DOC, DIR. MAYA MC KECHNEAY)

#### 2014

MACONDO (FICTION, DIR. SUDABEH MORTEZAI)  
HIGH PERFORMANCE (FICTION, DIR. JOHANNA MODER)

#### 2013

MY FATHERS, MY MOTHER & ME (DOC, DIR. PAUL ROBERT)  
HIGH PERFORMANCE (FICTION, DIR. JOHANNA MODER)

#### 2012

STILL LIFE (FICTION, DIR. SEBASTIAN MEISE)  
OUTING (DOC, DIR. SEBASTIAN MEISE & THOMAS REIDER)

#### 2010

PAL ADRIENN (FICTION, DIR. AGNES KOCSIS)







## **CAST**

**JOY ANWULIKA ALPHONSUS**

JOY

**PRECIOUS MARIAM SANUSI**

PRECIOUS

**ANGELA EKELEME PIUS**

MADAME

**GIFT IGWEH  
SANDRA JOHN  
CHIKA KIPO  
ELLA OSAGIE**

FLATMATES

**CHRISTIAN LUDWIG**

CHRISTIAN

**MARY KREUTZER**

COUNSELOR





## CREDITS

WRITER, DIRECTOR

**SUDABEH MORTEZAI**

DOP

**KLEMENS HUFNAGL**

PRODUCTION DESIGN

**JULIA LIBISELLER**

COSTUME DESIGN

**CAROLA PIZZINI**

SOUND

**ATANAS TCHOLAKOV**

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

**MARLIES FAULEND**

EDITOR

**OLIVER NEUMANN**

RE-RECORDING MIXER

**MANUEL MEICHSNER  
BERNHARD MAISCH**

COLOR GRADING

**ANDI WINTER**

PRODUCTION MANAGER

**LENA KRINS**

FULL CREDITS ON IMDB

PRODUCER

**OLIVER NEUMAN & SABINE MOSER**



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