

# Floor van der Meulen about THE LAST MALE ON EARTH

## Rhino and mankind

Sudan is the last of its kind. A northern white rhinoceros, of which there are only three left - two females and this 40 year old bull. The animal is a star, the Kenyan conservancy where he spends his last days, is like a pilgrimage site where thousands come to take selfies and pet the colossus. Extinction as an attraction. *"It was surreal to touch something that will soon disappear,"* says Dutch director Floor van der Meulen.

The striking documentary THE LAST MALE ON EARTH was presented as DoxSpot in ECFA Journal's September issue. We met Floor van der Meulen at the *doxs!* Festival in Duisburg.

Floor van der Meulen: After I shot several films about the Syrian civil war in Aleppo, it felt like it was time for a change. That is when I saw this provoking picture in a newspaper: a rhino surrounded by armed guys in camouflage suits. I was curious: what kind of a rhino would need a team of per-

sonal bodyguards? I found out about Sudan, the last male Northern white rhinoceros alive. I traveled to Kenya, presuming I would make a film about those rangers protecting him. But on the spot I found Sudan surrounded by scientists, journalists, tourists, reporters and other filmmakers. As if he had the eyes of the whole world focused upon him. Although I don't have a background in biology, I started considering a new angle for my film: the strange attraction of this last male specimen, the power struggle between nature and mankind.

**The film starts with a story about God and the beginning of mankind. Humans had to choose between eternal life or procreation – giving birth to children.**

van der Meulen: That story's origin could as well be African. A correspondent who has been living in Africa for 30 years told me about the multiple fables about gods and animals. It fitted perfectly to the film, as a way



to introduce the audience to a documentary that is not about a rhino, but about the nature of mankind, who wants to be the ultimate masters of the universe.

**The film was screened in several children's film festivals, like in Zlin, in the JEF festival... Here in Duisburg it ended up in the *doxs!* section, not in the adult audience programme.**

van der Meulen: When the film was picked up by the children's film circuit, I was surprised, as I expected the philosophic tone to be too complex for children. But when watching it to-

gether with them, everything fell into place. Children are very sensitive to this film, and they are the next generation, they can make a change. All of a sudden, film felt like a powerful tool.

**When you started your film four years ago, did you expect Sudan to make it till the end of the shooting?** van der Meulen: Sudan was very old. When he got sick, we knew his final moment could be just around the corner. It was like a voice whispering in my ear: "You just wait long enough." Waiting is expensive, as you have to deliver at some moment, according to agreements with producers and



broadcasters. But the images of his dying days are so powerful. It is like looking straight into the eyes of extinction, and recording how mankind deals with it. When making a film about how we deal with 'the end', I thought we had to continue till... the end.

**In the editing, you're using mainly non-verbal elements to comment on the situation.**

van der Meulen: It was my intention to observe the human species as much as the rhino. There was a whole 'theatre' going on around Sudan, with a marketing strategy behind it. Simply showing this theatre and the many people involved in it, could be considered a critical observation of mankind. We choose for a distant, static camera to observe those people, using wide shots that make them look small within their own natural habitat. I hope this visual style will invite the audience to reflect on what they see. It all adds to the tragicomic tone of the film... the human tragedy.

**Many of your interview partners had difficulties to properly answer your questions.**

van der Meulen: Like, why is it crucial to save this rhino? We tend to see everything from a human perspec-



tive, we see all those questions in relation to ourselves. Not being able to answer them, says something about the human ego. And then there's the scientists, for whom saving Sudan is a project with great prestige. Conservation always confronts you with a dilemma: why saving one species (or subspecies, like the Northern white rhino) seems more important than saving another?

**Finally Sudan turns out to be less important for the survival of the species than his female companions.**

van der Meulen: The whole marketing plan was focused on the last male, because that sounds dramatic and sexy. Also two female rhinos are living in that conservancy but nobody mentions them, they can't be petted like Sudan, they're simply less interesting for the general audience. My dilemma

was: what would be the best moment to introduce them in the film? Staying true to reality – them being super important but never recognised as such – I only introduce them after two thirds of the film. For me as a female filmmaker, that says something about the times we are living in.

**What will be the next step? The extinction of the human race?**

van der Meulen: If we continue like this, probably yes. And it is too easy to put all responsibility on the shoulders of young people. Now a generation has stood up that wants to make a difference. But if we want that to happen, then it is time for the older generation to step aside and make room for a new way of thinking. If we want them to save the world, all of us should take our responsibilities and think about what kind of future

we want together. Not only in Europe. In this evolving world, African people as well claim their rights to a modern, democratic society. In their quest for growth, they will need land, until there is no space for nature left.

**Then what use is there in reviving species?**

van der Meulen: The Northern white rhino eventually could revive, but bringing a species back to life with only three living specimens left is a gigantic task. We might better focus on other species then. Moreover, if we prove to be able to revive an entire species, this might give us yet another excuse for acting even more destructive from now on, "because we can always bring them back in the end". Humans are always willing to "play God". We probably would be able to bring mammoths back to the Siberian tundra. But the only reasons I can think of for doing that, are tourism, money and prestige – simply to prove that we can.

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