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# THE EAST

A FILM BY JIM TAIHUTTU

140 minutes, Netherlands

<http://www.magnetreleasing.com/theeast/>

## FINAL PRESS NOTES

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## **SYNOPSIS**

During the post-WW2 Indonesian War of Independence, a young Dutch soldier joins an elite unit led by a mysterious captain known only as “The Turk.” When the fighting intensifies, the young soldier finds himself questioning - and ultimately challenging - his commander’s brutal strategy to stop the resistance.

## INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

***Wolf* came out two years after *Rabat*, and *The East* almost eight years after *Wolf*. Why has it been such a long process?**

I took a lot of time in the beginning because I really wanted to come out with something new and something bigger. I didn't want to be put in the box of being that dude who only dealt with immigration issues. We had achieved a certain level doing that. There was such a big difference professionally and in terms of size between *Rabat* and *Wolf*, that I wanted to make a similar kind of jump again. I felt it would take a minimum of four or five years, but between my last film and this one I also had three kids, made four albums with Yellow Claw and flew around the world maybe forty times to work as a DJ. I was just too busy doing other things.

**Your musical career had priority?**

Absolutely. There was one very clear moment. I was in America for meetings, some of them about directing two American films. One of them would be a kind of remake of *Wolf*, and the other an existing screenplay that I was offered. At the same time I was talking about doing a world tour with Yellow Claw, including a show at Coachella. I had to make a choice between the two. Geza Weisz is a good friend of mine, his father is of course the film director Frans Weisz. He is still making films at eighty. So I thought: let me at least try the music first, and if it doesn't work out I can always make films. Both Marwan and I were very warmly received after *Wolf*, and there really were a lot chances for us. But it still didn't feel like that's what I wanted to do next.

**You started writing *The East* in between Yellow Claw shows?**

No, I freed up different periods for that.

**What role did co-writer Mustafa Duygulu have?**

Mustafa is someone I trust very much, as an actor, director, writer and friend. He mainly was a sounding board during the writing, someone who was able to say: that's fake, that sucks, I don't like this, let's focus on this, work on that. That was really great, and the cool thing is, because I couldn't come to the Netherlands due to the pandemic, he directed the final scenes. By now we were five years into the process. When I saw him for the first time at a casting, he told me he had ambitions to direct, and years later I was easily able to trust him with the job.

**You said you didn't want to make another immigration film. *The East* is about the Dutch role in the Indonesian War of Independence, which is of course a subject you are connected to, as a child of Moluccan parents**

In the Netherlands it's very easy to be put in a certain box and that's something I've noticed in the things that came on my path and the offers I got. But if I can take my time and, thanks to the music, have the financial leeway to work on something and plan it at length, I want to come up with something surprising. We had proven with this group of people that we were capable of making things that move people. That comes with a certain responsibility. So when you begin a new project, there should be some cultural urgency to it. I wouldn't have had that with a new *Wolf*. Or with an American remake of *Wolf*. It didn't seem like a good investment of my time. There is no cultural value in repeating that.

**You owed it to your status to come up with a more ambitious project.**

Yes, but also with something that finds its own place in... not just Dutch cinema, but pop culture too. I had the feeling we'd done that with *Wolf*. I have found out over the last few years that I'm not the kind of guy who easily directs a few episodes of a series, or squeezes in a romantic comedy for the money. It feels like a waste of my time. I feel a responsibility to bring up things that, like *Rabat* and *Wolf*... Look, those subjects have become normal now. But I remember when I submitted the screen play for *Wolf* with the Film Fund, and their first reaction was: but surely this doesn't happen in the Netherlands? I then sent them about a hundred pages of newspaper articles that showed that all the scenes in *Wolf*, with the exception of the emotional ones, were related to current events: from robberies of money transports to bank raids involving explosives, and young boys who rapidly progress from petty crime to large-scale, armed crime. After the film came out the mayor of Amsterdam, Eberhard van der Laan, invited me to lunch to talk about the film. That's the kind of film I like to make: one that gives the young people in the theater a good time, but also has a societal relevance to it. Where the *Pathé* in the big city is sold out, but the arthouse in the provinces is as well.

**And now everyone watches *Mocro Maffia*.**

Which is awesome! I watch it myself. But a series like that would have been unthinkable eight years ago. It's cool that streaming allows young people to make their preferences known and influence pop culture as a result. That show has also become a kind of alternative film school or acting school, where lots of people are offered opportunities that would have been impossible ten years ago.

**Back to *The East*. Your job was not just to write a thrilling story, it had to be historically accurate too and contain a deeper layer. That's quite a task.**

Yes, that's why it took a while before I knew what it had to be. It's easy to slip into a kind of history lesson, and I didn't want that. I wanted the film to be so stimulating that it makes you want to read a book about it, or find out about it online. More of an unconscious history lesson, and without shying away from certain things.

**At the heart of it is a historic figure, Raymond Westerling aka The Turk. How did you end up with him?**

He is someone who comes up very quickly once you start studying the subject, a fascinating figure. Years later the CIA tried to recruit him during the Vietnam war. He's a real film character. There is an insane amount of information and disinformation about him that is overwhelming in its drama and heroism, but that also has a dark side. The myth is almost as grand as the misdeeds he's accused of committing. He was from the intelligence service, and I think he had quite a hand in creating this image of a kind of Rambo avant-la-lettre. I immediately loved the idea of making a film about him. After Wolf it was a godsend. Everyone wanted to make another tough immigrant movie and both Marwan and I didn't feel like it. This just had to be his next role. You want people to go: huh, is that the same guy?

Westerling had a very charismatic, and therefore sometimes manipulative, air about him. Marwan became him mainly by reading a lot. Being an action hero in Hollywood, he has become a fairly well-trained military slash special-forces type dude. It's funny, you can wake him up in the middle of the night and he's able to quickly load various weapons. He has learned sword fighting and horseback-riding. He has studied military training from the period and it quickly became clear how that kind of background— and hierarchy— influences the playing of that kind of character: there is a certain way a person like that behaves. That imposes constraints, and those constraints allow you to work much more freely.

**And that's how you came to write a story about a group of boys who volunteered to join the army and go to the Indies. How did you compose that group?**

The interesting thing about the soldiers we talked to and the diaries I read, was that the soldiers came from all over the country. There were really two groups: one was more or less recruited by the church from small villages, and the other was made up of guys who, after the liberation of the Netherlands, saw themselves liberating Indonesia. Handing out chocolate and pantyhose, aspiring to that romantic notion of liberation. The five years during the Second World War had been quite boring for young people, so an adventure in Indonesia sounded good, and there was a higher purpose into the bargain. Many boys went there expecting it to be like a school trip. See something of the world. The way a lot of people are recruited into the army today, actually. Get your driver's license.

**As a viewer you automatically identify with soldier Johan de Vries, played by Martijn Lakemeier. He seems like the good guy, the Dutchman as he likes to see himself. How did you approach that character?**

I noticed that a lot of boys who went to the Indies – were sent, recruited – ended up being exploited, they were deployed in the wrong way and didn't have good information. Many boys came back disappointed and didn't understand why they had been there. In a number of conversations I found out how quickly certain standards slip in that kind of cocoon, in the kind of weird vacuum you're in. When you look at the purges on Celebes, the summary executions and really all the abuses that took place there, they were actually carried out by boys who just happened to grow up in the Netherlands during that time. Without the war in Indonesia they would have become bakers or bicycle repairmen or farmers. Where is the turning in the road of life that leads you to become a killer? You or I will probably never kill anyone. But it happened to a lot of those boys. I wanted to find out how that happens. Because you don't step off the boat thinking you're just going to shoot someone for the hell of it. Over time things happen that blur boundaries and, together with other boys, you enter into a kind of rush of war. And a few years later you're saddled with a war trauma that wakes you up in the middle of the night, sweating and thinking: what have I done? A friend of mine lived through Srebrenica. I know him as the man before and the man after, and the difference is huge. It's the premise of the film: how does an ordinary boy become a killer?

**Did this make you think more mildly about people who have committed war crimes?**

I don't think you should think more mildly about that, but I do think that there are more perspectives as to why things happen. Let me put it this way: I don't think the crimes are any less because of it, but I do have a better understanding of how a normal boy ends up in a situation where he does things like that. There are two kinds of people in situations of panic or war or stress. Or maybe even in life in general. One takes a step forward, the other takes a step back. One takes a left turn and the other takes a right. And if you happen to go right, that's the perfect place to let that side of you foster.

**You have made two films with Marwan Kenzari already. Nonetheless it's a remarkable choice to cast someone of Tunisian descent in the role of a half-Dutch, half-Greek character.**

I don't see it that way. Someone who is half-Dutch and half-Greek can look like Jacob Derwig, but also like Marwan. I thought: Marwan will be the same age when we start filming, so why couldn't he be this Greek guy? The only thing we did was straighten his hair.

**How do you see Marwan's development as an actor from Rabat to Wolf to The East?**

He has done so many big things in the interim. When he comes on the set you can tell he has been working at a very high level for the last couple of years. Because of that, he works very meticulously, he knows very well what he wants and what he doesn't want. I think the young actors got a kick out of seeing someone arriving with his little briefcase

like some kind of hitman, methodically putting together his rifle and then playing his scene. And then standing in the back of the line for his cup of soup during the break.

He is just a superstar. Period. You can think of that what you want, but when he's in the room, there's danger. That's something you either have or you don't. Those are the kinds of people who always stand in the right place. There's a reason why he's in yet another huge American movie.

**Martijn Lakemeier is now a similar kind of shooting star.**

He's doing really well. The interesting thing about Martijn is that he's been acting during his entire adolescence, which means he brings a certain precision in his acting that is really impressive. I knew back in 2013 that he had to play De Vries. For a moment I was worried that it was going to take too long and he would be too old, but I'm happy I made the film with him. He's a very constant factor. It's impossible to faze him. You can throw him down the stairs, hold him under water for a minute, he's in extremely good shape, physically. This was by no means an easy film. He studied the language, everything really.

**How did you go from writing the script to the process of getting the film made?**

During the four or five years when we were working towards shooting, we've been up and down to Indonesia a few times. Indonesia is not a country with an infrastructure to handle large outside productions, so we kind of needed to reinvent the wheel a little bit. On top of that, lots of things kept changing during that period: economically, socially, politically, you name it. The country is changing rapidly. In the five years since we started our research, some things had doubled in price. (Line producer) Philip Harthoorn, (director of photography) Lennart Verstegen and (production designer) Lieke Scholman have worked really hard, meeting with hundreds of people to map out how and where to shoot this in the best possible way, what it's like to be on a set where four different languages are spoken simultaneously and there are all kinds of cultural and religious differences. It was a huge puzzle.

**Lennart Verstegen has been your director of photography for years now. What kind of relationship do you have, and how has it developed since Rabat? How did you approach The East with him?**

Even more than a director of photography, Lennart is an adventurer. He thrives on being thrown into the deep end. He handles pressure extremely well, and he's the most positive and energetic person I, and many others, have ever met. That makes him a rock and an indispensable asset to this project. When the shooting schedule was changed so massively and postponed at the last moment, it created a lot of problems for me because I had a lot of bookings as a DJ that I couldn't get out of. Lennart took some things upon himself during preparation that normally require the presence of the director, and sometimes we came on set unprepared, which didn't exactly make things easier on him. But this guy is so super zen it's absurd.

I met him on Dio's music video for 'Het is Je Boy', where he operated the second camera. His job was to shoot a lot of different things throughout the day, so we'd have a little bit of extra material. When I started editing the video with Wouter van Luijn, it turned out that everything Lennart had shot was right on the money. Half the video ended up consisting of his shots. I thought he was a really special guy. After that he shot Wolken #2 and Dominique while he was still in film school. He was still very young. But one thing led to another and four months later we were shooting Rabat. He did Wolf and Catacombe too, and I would be very sad if he wasn't able to do my next film as well.

We did a lot of digging for The East. I had bought this book once, Bali in colors, published by Douwe Egberts (coffee brand) in 1951. In those days you could cut out points from the coffee wrappings, and when you sent them in you received a color picture of Bali that you could put in the book.

During our research we talked to a lot of former soldiers, and when that became more known, I was sent diaries as well. That was really cool. Those conversations and the diaries made the youth culture of the Dutch soldiers in that period even more interesting to me. I felt the film needed to be more about that, and not just about Westerling.

The pictures had crazy saturated colors that gave them a very specific look. Lennart and I decided that that was the way to go. From there we went looking for lenses and for ways to light it. When you look at Joppo's grading from de Grot, you'll see that there's a weird tinge that covers the whole film.

### **The same question really about Lieke Scholman.**

She once built a set for a music video for Habbekrats, that had to look like the morning after a party. When I arrived I actually started to wonder. Did she really create it like this, or was there in fact a party here last night? From that moment on we hit it off. She is someone I trust blindly. She spent almost a year in Indonesia for this film. She went ahead early on to create the camp, to build all the interiors and make all the gear. The camp is real. In the film there's a shot of a garage, and it was completely equipped. There's all kinds of stuff there that you needed to fix a car in the forties. The pans and the food in the kitchen where the soldiers' food is prepared are real. The whole camp is a kind of open-air museum. Unfortunately it has been torn down by now. Lieke is very good at leading a team, and she goes on until she gets what she wants. Her research is very good, and she's very clever at structuring it to filmmaking. She's really great. Without people like Philip, Lennart and Lieke I would never have been able to make this film. They are all people who have made this film a special project in their lives.

We have built and made everything in the film ourselves, that's pretty extreme. So extreme that you don't even notice it. So many little things. You probably don't notice that there are three versions of every uniform varying the degree of wash and tear. In the average Dutch war movie every German soldier walks around in a pristine outfit deep into 1945, but of course in reality that stuff wore down over time. The wehrmacht ran out of soap at some point. Those are the kinds of details you can use to influence the



audience. In Wolf, Nasrdin wears a different wash of his shirt every time, and a slightly bigger shirt as well, making it look like he grows paler and smaller throughout the film.

**I gather the shoot on Java was quite an undertaking.**

Everyone told me beforehand that I was crazy to shoot a film in the jungle. You think it won't be that bad, but once you're in the middle of it you find out: yes, this is something you should never do. But it's too late by then, and you just have to get on with it. But it's impossible! When we were back shooting in the Netherlands after that, I remembered how easy it can be. There were four languages being spoken on the set, which led to quite a lot of miscommunications, and then there's the weather, nature, a totally different culture, lots of flights... We had a great deal of narrow escapes in many areas. We had eighty drivers on the payroll every day to get everyone to the right place. That tells you a lot about the scale of this project. There was a whole department just to direct and schedule the drivers. There's a whole army of people who never so much as laid eyes on an army boot.

As a director it's your job to create an atmosphere in which there's no mutiny. And to make sure everyone knows that there's only a small number of people who actually make the decisions. And even then a lot goes wrong. Sometimes more went wrong than right. You make the best of it, haha. A production of this size is like a container ship. There's not much point getting angry, you can only steer it if you stay calm and realize that when you adjust the wheel it still takes two hours before you even start to move in that direction. Especially in the tropics it's better to conserve your energy and maybe just lie down on the ground for an hour, close your eyes and do some thinking. And after that you take stock of the situation. The overall plan was made anew every day. Every day things didn't go according to plan.

Eventually we ended up going way over budget, which meant we ran out of money to finish the film. For a long time I didn't have a good feeling about this project. Covid caused the whole cinema business to crash, and our distributor went bankrupt. Fortunately Amazon came on board, which gave us the chance to finish the film. Without Covid that would never have happened. The feeling that this was a huge failure only went away after we were able to shoot the final scenes at the end of last year.

**How would you have resolved it without the money from Amazon?**

Nobody knows!

**Countless World War II films have been made in the Netherlands. This is a historic film about another war, not that much later. Do you still see *The East* in that tradition of Dutch war films or is it completely separate from that?**

No, I certainly see it in that tradition. Just not in terms of style. It's almost like Dutch war films automatically come with a rather lame cinematographic style.

It's a film about colonialism, but it still has an attractive white young man in the lead. It's a film about white people, yes, haha. I sometimes get the feeling that people think it's a very multicultural film, but it's not, at all. This is just the way it was. A lot of Dutch boys were sent over there, and no Moroccan or Surinamese boys.

**But you could have chosen an Indonesian perspective.**

The Dutch public is not ready for that yet. People don't even know what the hell happened there, much less are they prepared to accept that perspective. Maybe there will be room for that after this film. But I was fascinated myself by the boys who lived in a kind of bubble there and had no idea what they were getting into. In that way the film does reflect the colonial policy.

**Private De Vries thinks he can have a relationship with a prostitute, and sees himself as a kind of benefactor.**

In the first version that was a very romantic storyline with a local girl, but the more I read... There's never been an army camp established anywhere without a brothel being hastily added next door. A hundred thousand boys were simply dropped into a country with totally different customs. They feasted their eyes, and there were no parents to keep an eye on them. In the diaries you read a lot of stories about prostitution and venereal disease and girls getting pregnant. That's when I changed that storyline into something that may be less pleasant, but is definitely more honest.

**The film is a co-production with Shanty Harmayn's company Salto Films from Jakarta. What kind of person is she and what was it like working with the Indonesians?**

Shanty is practically the godmother of Indonesian cinema and without her *The East* would not have happened. Period. She brought us into contact with the right people, the right crews. Because she got involved a lot of doors were opened. A very important person and a really cool woman too. She and her company have made a lot of sacrifices when this project got into trouble. I'll be forever grateful to her for that.

She has a very strong team that knows where the cultural differences are and how to handle them. A team that was able to relate to what we were trying to say and how. There are many more films made in Indonesia than there are in the Netherlands, and much bigger ones, too. Dutch filmmaking is a lot more informal and I'm glad that we were able to maintain that. On the first day of shooting there was a cooler with tasty drinks on the set, on it was a notice that said, Jim only, don't touch. I had to ask them to cover that up or I would have been made fun of, haha. That's not how we work. And that's a good thing. They liked the fact that we came over to their country to tell this story, and that there was an interest in Indonesian history, and that we wanted to work with them and show how beautiful the country is. They saw that our intentions were good and sincere.

**Is there a lot of interest in the film in Indonesia?**

That's hard to say. There is interest for sure, but I do sometimes get the feeling that young people in Indonesia are not that interested in the past. They celebrate their independence day once a year, and it's more a heroic story about how boys with found weapons and farmers armed with swords and sticks drove their betters out of the country, than a day to reflect on all the horrors. Of course I hope people here will watch it, and see that I've studied their culture and language, and that I show a different perspective.

**Did your Moluccan background play a part?**

Maybe at first in arousing my interest and maybe also in daring to make the film. But it was absolutely not decisive.

**Was it a subject that was much talked about within your family?**

No. It's quite common: the people who lived through it prefer not to talk about it. My father knows very little about what exactly took place. He had never been to Indonesia and when we went there to scout locations, he came with me and we also looked for sounds. He has once again made the music for this film and that too was quite a trip.

**How would you like *The East* to be received?**

I would like to see this film on the shelves of history teachers in high schools. For them to have the chance to tell their students that there is a piece of history that has been systematically suppressed, and then be able to show them something that gives an idea of the time. And it would be cool if the film, like *Wolf*, can show that there is an audience for this kind of story, and that there's talent, with people like Joenoes Polnaija and Denise Aznam. And that there is a huge audience for Indonesian stories, not just from the past, but from the present too. There are plenty of Dutch productions about groups of friends that don't have a single person of color. Why shouldn't Joenoes play in one of those?

Why shouldn't Denise play the mother of some school child? *Rabat* and *Wolf* not only showed that there is an audience, but that there's talent too. Hopefully *The East* will open the door to stories that need to be told, considering the fact that the two countries have been intertwined with each other for four hundred years.

**What was it like for you to direct a film for the first time that is set so far in the past?**

Everything goes slowly. You can't just film anywhere you want, you're constantly tied to wigs and suits and this can't be in the shot and that can't be in the shot. It doesn't make for a very free way of working. It was hard for me to get used to that. A lot of time went into preparation –it always does, but this time maybe even more than I expected. My next film will be set in 1995 and I hope it will be less of a struggle. I will certainly think twice before making a film about the Second World War.

### **What does this film say about the Netherlands?**

That it's absurd that a film like this has not been made before, sometime in the last seventy years. It should have been done a long time ago in the eighties or nineties. There are no less than thirty films about

the resistance, and it feels like everyone who was in the resistance has had a movie made about them. And this film came close to not happening at all. Because if it had taken another ten years the living witnesses would no longer have been here for the research, and the interest might well have dissipated completely. I feel we've made this film in the nick of time.

## **ABOUT THE FILMMAKER**

Jim Taihuttu (1981) is a writer-director and part of the DJ-act Yellow Claw. He is also the co-founder of production company Habbekrats (later New Amsterdam Film Company). Taihuttu directed the feature films RABAT (2011) and WOLF (2013), in addition to numerous short films, music videos, documentaries and commercials. His previous films RABAT and WOLF were awarded multiple Golden Calves. WOLF was further nominated for Best Feature at the Austin Fantastic Fest 2013 and the San Sebastián International Film Festival 2013. At the latter festival in Spain it was awarded the Youth Jury Award, and the film also won the Special Jury Prize at the Taipei Film Festival 2014.

## CREDITS

MAGNET RELEASING AND NEW AMSTERDAM FILM COMPANY

PRESENT "THE EAST"

IN CO-PRODUCTION WITH WRONG MEN, SALTO FILMS, NTR

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COSTUME DESIGNER CATHERINE MARCHAND, RETNO DAMAYANTI

MAKE-UP ORIANE DE NEVE

WARDROBE ADI WAHONO

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