

Prisoners of the desert

A Belgian filmmaker travelled through deserts to record fading memories. **Ian Mundell** hears about the forgotten prisoners of Mauritania

'You start out saying that you will film the desert in a different way, but it is just too strong," says Belgian documentary maker Pierre-Yves Vandeweerd about working in Mauritania. "The visual qualities assert themselves, all that beauty and grandeur, and you risk falling into a picture-postcard aesthetic."

That would not have done for the story Vandeweerd wanted to tell about political prisoners whose detention in the late 1980s is barely remembered in Mauritania today.

The film is called *Le Cercle des noyés*, or circle of drowned men, the name by which the prisoners were known. They were most of them intellectuals involved with Flam, the African Liberation Forces of Mauritania, who were fighting for the rights of Black Africans in a society dominated by Moorish groups. Imprisoned first in the capital Nouakchott, they were later transported more than 1,000km into the desert to an old fort at Oualata, where desperate living conditions were made worse by a harsh work regimen and torture.

The survivors were released in the early 1990s, when Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya moved from the head of the military junta in power since 1984 to president of a civil government. However, they were only tolerated by the new regime and even discussing what had happened was extremely risky. "At a certain moment they realised that, if things went on like this, they would even stop talking about it among themselves," says Vandeweerd. "Everybody would forget what they had lived through, including themselves."

Making a film was out of the question but, over a decade of visits to the north-west African country, Vandeweerd and his collaborators recorded in secret the



"Life sometimes is like the movies": Pierre-Yves Vandeweerd found a window of opportunity in Mauritania

men's memories. They would tell the same stories over and over, but they also reached into the more obscure part of their experience, such as the dreams and what they talked about while in prison.

With no improvement in their situation and slowly losing members to age and ill health, it was decided in 2005 to take the risk and make a film. One of the former prisoners, Fara Bâ, would speak for them all. Together with Vandeweerd, he wrote a commentary, which was translated into Peule and recorded by Fara Bâ himself.

"There is something almost hypnotic about his voice, and the idea was that the spectator should experience his story as much by listening as through the images," says Vandeweerd. "Then it became a question of working on that mismatch between a story from the past and images from the present, a present

where no trace remains of the men's imprisonment."

In order to enter into the mental universe of Fara Bâ's story and to combat the seductive beauty of the desert, Vandeweerd filmed in black and white, for the most part showing the places where the prisoners were detained rather than the people themselves. When filming outside, he chose windy days when the sand was being lifted up and blown across the landscape, producing haunting images that evoke the isolation and loss of memory so central to the story.

The most striking images are of Oualata. "The fort has always been a prison, and I had no idea whether we would get within a kilometre of it," says Vandeweerd. "But we were lucky – life sometimes is like the movies – and when we arrived we found that, for the first time in its existence, the fort was no longer a prison. There were guards, but they let us film whatever we wanted. Eight months later, when we went back, it was impossible to get near the fort. There were soldiers everywhere."

Between the two trips, in August 2005, a military coup put the head of national security in control of the country, and the prison was again in operation. This irony aside, the coup has signalled a change for the better in Mauritania. Steps towards greater democracy have been taken, and presidential elections are expected this month.

But this doesn't lessen the need for the movie. "The coup changed just one thing for me, but it was a fundamental change," says Vandeweerd. "It means I can show the film here and in Africa knowing that there will be no repercussions for those who spoke to me." ■

***Le Cercle de noyés* plays in Brussels at Flagey, Place Sainte-Croix, and at cinemas across Wallonia throughout March.**