

First and foremost, how did you come up with the idea of creating a film in Lusaka Correctional Facility?

Jakob: In the summer of 2011 I had just returned home from my first six years in Africa. Caught in the employment centre I started longing for something new. Something with writing or maybe film... Then I remembered the stories I had heard from Lusaka Central Correctional Facility. I could sense that something was at stake there. That the ones who got close to that place were transformed by their experiences. At the same time there were only a few who were allowed inside the prison. Even those who had worked in the field for years were not able to step inside the prison. In light of that, I gave Aase Mikkelsen from the ministry of foreign affairs a call. She was at the head of their media funds. I told her that I had really good contacts in Zambia, and that I might be able to gain access to the prison in Lusaka to make a film about it. Since then I have often laughed at the thought of that first conversation with Aase, and I cannot wait to ride my bike over to her very soon, with the finished film in my hand. She spent about an hour that day trying to convince me that it would be entirely impossible. And she was somehow correct. It is really difficult to make a film in there, especially when you are an outsider and do not have anything but a few ideas and only one possible entryway into the prison. That is also why it took almost nine years, or around two years per minute of the film, before the film was ready to be released. And in the meantime I could look forward to 10 more trips to Zambia, before the film would be finished.

Alexander: I was first contacted by Jakob and the producer Emil, after they had been working on the project for seven years. They actually already had the funding for the film cleared, and had been collaborating with some other directors, who eventually quit the project. But they had another story in mind back then, and when they asked me if I wanted to help them realize that story, I said: "I don't think we'll be able to do that. But we can try going to Zambia and see which stories are present". That they actually agreed to do. They already had the funding to go there, with the purpose of doing some research, which could then be extended to actually shooting the film, if we found the right stories. And that in particular is a gift for any director: not having to do the hard preliminary work. These seven, long years where they tried to make it happen with the funding and so on... That is why I was so convinced of the fact that it might work – some way or another.

How did your interest in specifically Williams' story come about?

Jakob: Ironically, it was quite tricky to keep our cast in the prison. One of the first stories we worked on was centered around a drama group, which Hastings had started in the prison. But then, suddenly, two of the most interesting persons in this group disappeared. One had been waiting five years for a sentence, and was acquitted, another had been waiting for eight years. He was given the death penalty and was relocated to death row in the neighbouring village Kabwe. During all of this I had noticed William in a casting for Hastings' drama group. I remember him standing there in this long line of hopeful inmates, who all wished to be a part of the group. I was fascinated by the contrast of his rough, tattooed appearance and some kind of tenderness in the way he spoke and carried himself.

Alexander: When we arrived, we could immediately sense that William was weighed down by the fact that he had not seen his wife and child in six months, and that he had not heard from his wife in approximately as long. He did not really know what went on outside the prison walls. And that was what we started circling around: the question of how important your relationships with those outside the walls actually is for your well-being or for your capability to move on. Or to survive in general. I think that this general aspect of relationships outside and inside the prison walls was something that I became very captivated by. It was sort of the same with Hastings. He had initiated so many things for the inmates, to improve their everyday lives. But he also had this mediation between the inmates and their relatives, and I thought that we could find much stronger narratives in that. There was much more at stake for the inmates here. I think that I often try to look for drama in that manner. At the same time I also think that this story contains a sort of homage to Hastings and what he tried to do for the inmates, which really was very unique.

What is, according to you, the premise of the film? And has the focus of the film changed since the start of the project?

Alexander: In my case I was pretty focused on not telling just another “look how bad it is in Africa”-story. There were plenty of those around already. It was more about trying to see which positive tendencies were present, and which positive initiatives that were being made in the prison. But reality is, that life in prison is tough, so it is difficult to find a story that is not marked by unhappiness in some shape or form. Just as William's story is. There are so many inmates, who are destined for dark futures. I do not think my focus changed that much during the project, but I clearly became much wiser. For me, the premise was always: Go to Zambia and have a look. See which stories actually are worth telling and might contribute with some hope and some confidence that it all gets better. Because that I believe, there is a need for. To bring those stories to life.

Jakob: Originally, I wanted to touch upon some of the same topics that are present in Holocaust literature. My thought was that in a prison, where people can spend up to a decade of their lives without being convicted, the inmates would be exposed to immense psychological pressure. I was curious about what happens when people are surrounded by such darkness and how, if possible, one is able to emerge from it. I still think that this is what the film is about, in some capacity. William was driven by his love for his daughter, and we get the feeling that other inmates are turning their eyes upwards, trying to find a relationship with God. Hastings considers his mission to be driven by gratitude, because he is able to give back what he received himself when he at one point was absorbed by this darkness. Having said that, it is one thing to be interested in and philosophizing about human nature and potential, and then to convert all of this into a good film!

Why, in your mind, is the film relevant and why is it important to share this story with the world?

Who do you think the film is supposed to address and what do you wish to show the audience?

Alexander: The target audience is actually very broad. I think that most people will be able to identify with and be fascinated by the universe inside the prison and by the central question of what it means for man to be imprisoned. We focus on the existential story which lies in being in confinement. In that way it is a very universal notion that we all need our family and other people around us to survive.

Was that also what you were looking for in the characters you decided to showcase in the documentary? Considering your words about identification and being able to relate to the characters? Or did the cast come about more or less organically?

Alexander: It definitely happened organically, but we were also aware of the danger of telling a very unclear or narrow story. It was important for me that the audience was able to identify with the battle in the story. I think that there are so many things which we might not know of as westerners. We do not know how it is to be locked up in a prison. That is not something you are immediately able to identify with. It was very important to find something that we were able to identify with. And it must be immensely difficult to long after a broken relationship and not being in control of what might happen with your life.

Have you been in contact with the cast since shooting the film, and do you know what has happened with them?

Alexander: William died in March 2020. He was killed by the police while he drove in a stolen car. We got to show the film to William two weeks before his death, and he told us to push it and to show it to the rest of the world. He thought the film was great. It was really nice that he was able to see the film before he was killed.

Jakob: Hastings is still one of my best friends to this day. He became one of my closest friends during the shooting of the film. We are in contact almost every week, and I hope to see him again soon. In many ways he was also the one who sustained the project. At times where everything seemed impossible, he would say

“Don’t be defeated”. He has a faith, a faith in God, which secures his hope. The project nearly fell apart many times, with dead ends and stories that could not be told after all, but Hastings stood by us all along. So I am very grateful to him. Because now we have a film. That is amazing!

Let us talk about your experiences with shooting a film in a prison. Were there ever anything or any parts of the prison, which you could not film or were not allowed to?

Alexander: Yes, it was kind of crazy that we were not allowed to film the watchtower. The guards would walk around up there with guns and keep an eye on the prison yard. They were extremely attentive to the fact that we could not film up there. I do not know if it was because of the harsh look of someone keeping an eye on the inmates, or if it was a matter of security. I never really figured out what that was about.

Jakob: There was something about the watchtower. It was the inner sanctum so to speak. It was a serious place. The door was locked at the bottom, and when you had entered the tower you had to walk up a long staircase, on top of which there was another door with another padlock. Inside was a man with a gun, 24 hours each day and night, who looked down at the prison yard. He could watch over everything, like the Panoptikon.

Alexander: There were a few of those peculiar little things. There were some rooms which we were allowed to film, but there were always curfews where the inmates were shooed into their tiny cells. At 5 PM they would usually be called in and by 6 they would be locked inside. Then they were not allowed to go out again until 6 or 7 in the morning. 12-13 hours they were trapped and packed like sardines in a tin in those small cells. They had 11 hours of freedom in the prison yard, where we then had the opportunity to do things with them, set them aside for interviews or just observe their activities for the day.

So you were not allowed to film the cells during curfew?

Alexander: We were able to one time, where I was locked in a cell along with the inmates. They of course thought that this was incredibly funny. But it really was a claustrophobic experience. That is also what many of the inmates tell us. About the first time they were locked inside to spend the night in the cell and had to be so close to the other inmates. That is definitely the worst part of it all, because then they discover the conditions they have to endure from now on. It is extreme. It really is incredible how man can get used to as grim, inhumane conditions as those in this prison. It becomes everyday for them. That also became clear looking at the inmates. Even though they thought it was unbearable, they also got used to those conditions... It is pretty fascinating what man is capable of enduring.

Did the camera have any effect on the cast in any way?

Jakob: Hastings loves movies. His biggest dream is to make one of his own, and to do drama and acting. He is a terrible actor, but he loves it. So he got caught up in the story of this film as well. He put a lot of attention on William and also wanted to see something happen in that regard. He completely entered a mindset of trying to show a sequence or to show some kind of progress with William. That way he could demonstrate some of the things which he believed in.

Alexander: I always think that the camera affects people. But it was difficult to see in this case, both because of the language barrier as well as the difficulty of spotting what really was going on in the shadows. The hierarchy in the prison yard was made up of a few cell-captains, who ruled their own cell. They were like dictators in their own little kingdom, each of them. It was brutal. The vast majority of the inmates did everything they were told to, because they knew of the consequences. But there were still some who smoked weed, took other drugs or were lending money, and cigarettes were often exchanged as a form of currency. If you owed money or lost in a game of gambling, it could go very wrong. A lot went on under our radar that we were not always able to see. Yet it seemed very peaceful and well-ordered, and even comfortable at times. The fact that I was able to walk around the prison yard completely without any guards

or anything, that is pretty unique. I have been told by people working in Danish prisons that this would not at all be possible in Denmark. It is way too dangerous. There definitely was another culture here and far more confidence in authorities than in the Danish prisons.

How would you describe your collaborating work as co-directors? How did your partnership develop and how has your collaboration of strengths shaped this film?

Alexander: I think we had very different roles. Jakob was the one who arranged access to places and persons, and I was in charge of the filming, the photography and sound, and I also have a very different experience with directing than Jakob. As for the storyline we both had a hand in it. We talked a lot about what we thought might be exciting and what we wanted to pursue. There was a very equal distribution of work in that regard. We were both curious and had a preference for some stories, which we then agreed to investigate further together. In my opinion we are both people who prefer to say yes rather than no. We both have a large will to tell stories and to see what hides beneath the surface, and to that extent we are very much alike. But you have to make some choices at some point when making a documentary. Otherwise you will end up not showing anything or telling any story. And we do not really want to make any of these choices, because everything has the potential to be useful and exciting. And as soon as you give one thing up, you grieve for all of the things that you are not able to showcase.

Jakob: It might be useful to know that Alexander rides a motorbike, which is also a good metaphor for Alexander who I have gotten to know through the years. He has a faith in things succeeding, and he is not afraid to drive directly into the hornet's nest. In my opinion Alexander's strength lies in his Jack Kerouak'esque outlook and zen belief in the fact that things will work out. That made us more patient and capable of making our story unfold very organically, from the bottom and upwards.

Alexander: It has been a pretty long process. In the beginning we thought we would do a story with three main characters, that is with two other prisoners than William, but it quickly became clear along the way, that by focusing on only a few components, this one story became more precise, touching and interesting. That was one of the biggest changes we made in the editing process: to keep scaling it down and making it more interesting. That did not mean that the story became more simple, but rather that the richness of the story now lies in the details instead of it being a very complex and unfamiliar story. In that manner, we gave the characters room to grow more complex and explored the characters' challenges in depth.