

## Va Vis et Deviens (2005)

By Tina Ottman

- Also known as *Go, See, and Become*; or *Live and Become*
- IMDB reference: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0388505/>
- Languages: Amharic, French and Hebrew.
- Dir: Radu Mihaileanu

*For a trailer of this beautiful film, including stills, see the Japanese site <http://yakusoku.cinemacafe.net/>*

*Va Vis et Deviens* is the moving story of an Ethiopian boy who arrives in Israel as a result of the first of two operations (Operation Moses in 1984, which was followed by Operation Solomon in 1991) to airlift Ethiopian Jewry from refugee camps in Sudan.

Given away by his starving Christian mother to a Jewish Ethiopian woman who dies not long after arrival in Israel, the boy (“Schlomo”) is instructed by his mother to keep his non-Jewish identity a secret, and not to return to Ethiopia until he has “become”.

A left-wing French-speaking Mizrahi family adopts Schlomo, who faces the additional burden that he must conceal his Christian identity for fear of deportation. The film charts his struggle to find his way through a difficult adolescence to adulthood.

Inspired by the work of *Medécins Sans Frontières* in refugee camps such as the one he was rescued from, Schlomo avoids combative compulsory military service by qualifying in medicine in Paris, yet on his return is required to serve as a medic in the *Intifada*-ravaged Occupied Territories. He is almost killed after an attempt to render humanitarian aid to Palestinian boy; the parents of the Palestinian boy sees only a soldier in uniform, not an army doctor.

It is only after his marriage to a spirited white Israeli, Sara, that Schlomo reveals his origins to his pregnant wife, and to his adoptive mother Yael. The truth nearly costs him his marriage, but—as Yael observes—through the love of many mothers, he survives, becomes whole again, and returns to Ethiopia to heal and be healed, and to relocate his birth mother.

Franco-Romanian-Israeli director Radu Mihaileanu, a refugee himself from Ceaucescu’s Romania, elicits extraordinary performances from the multilingual cast, in particular the three actors who play Schlomo at various ages (Moshes Agazai and Abebe, Sirak Sabahat), and the Israeli actress Yael Abecassis (as his adoptive mother Yael).

Ethiopian refugees (Beta Israel Jews, Falas Mura crypto Jews and other Ethiopian refugees) underwent (and continue to undergo) a great deal of trauma, humiliation, discrimination and racism in Israel, despite the country’s apparently beneficent and humanitarian intentions in the rescue and absorption of these immigrants (provided that

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their Jewish lineage could be verified). Many of them were/are not accepted as part of the Jewish majority, and forced “symbolic” conversions touched off waves of protests. For an overview of their situation, see <http://www.iaej.co.il/index.htm> the Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews, in particular data on the current impoverished and alienated situation of many Ethiopian Israeli immigrants  
[http://www.iaej.co.il/pages/community\\_news\\_facts.htm](http://www.iaej.co.il/pages/community_news_facts.htm) .

Note: French-dubbed DVD available only in Francophone countries.

(Ici un synopsis de Amazon.fr : “En 1984, des milliers d'Africains de 26 pays frappés par la famine se retrouvent dans des camps au Soudan. A l'initiative d'Israël et des Etats-Unis, une vaste action est menée pour emmener des milliers de Juifs éthiopiens vers Israël. Une mère chrétienne pousse son fils de neuf ans à se déclarer juif pour le sauver de la famine et de la mort. L'enfant arrive en Terre Sainte. Déclaré orphelin, il est adopté par une famille française sépharade vivant à Tel-Aviv. Il grandit avec la peur que l'on découvre son double-secret et mensonge : ni juif, ni orphelin, seulement noir. Il découvrira l'amour, la culture occidentale, la judaïté mais également le racisme et la guerre dans les territoires occupés.”)

Personal comment:

I saw this film in Kyoto, Japan, on its 2007 release there, and there was not a dry eye in the house.

The film raised a lot of painful questions, and brought back a lot of memories - when I emigrated to Israel, I was in an absorption centre in Arad, in the Negev Desert, together with Ethiopian immigrants. The elders would stare out at the desert the whole day, wrapped in their special silence and their white robes... did it remind them of their camps in Sudan? Years later I had a short teaching contract in the development town of Afula in central Israel, where I taught Ethiopian kids, so this topic remains very close to my heart. Extraordinary, beautiful children with great shining brown eyes, very bright and eager to learn. I hoped that many of them would not face disillusionment with Israeli society.