

UNITEDNOTIONS film presents

# Stolen

A film by Violeta Ayala and Dan Fallshaw

D-Cinema, 77min – Australia 2009

In English, Spanish and Hassaniya with English subtitles

## **Festival Screenings and Awards**

**Best Feature Documentary 2010** - Pan African Film Festival, Los Angeles

**Best Editing and Special Jury Mention 2010** - Doc NZ, Documentary Edge Film Festival

**Official Selection 2009** - Toronto International Film Festival

**Official Competition 2009** - International Documentary Festival Amsterdam (IDFA)

**Documentary Finalist 2009** - Sydney Film Festival

**Official Selection 2010** - Seattle International Film Festival

**Official Selection 2010** - Docaviv, Israel

**International Competition 2010** - It's All True Film Festival, Brazil

**Standing Up Competition 2010** - Cleveland International Film Festival

**Right to Know Competition 2010** - One World International Human Rights Film Festival

**Official Selection 2009** - Watch Docs Human Rights in Film, Poland

**Official Selection 2009** - Melbourne International Film Festival

**Official Selection 2010** - Norwegian Short Film Festival

**Official Selection 2010** - Glasgow Film Festival

**Official Selection 2010** - Singapore International Film Festival

**Official Selection 2010** - Doc Point, Helsinki Documentary Film Festival

**Official Selection 2010** - Guth Gafa International Documentary Film Festival, Ireland

**Official Selection 2010** - Victoria Film Festival, Canada

**Official Selection 2010** - Docville, Belgium

**Official Selection 2010** - EDOC, Ecuador

**Official Selection 2010** - Revelation Film Festival, Perth

**Official Selection 2010** - Byron Bay International Film Festival

**Official Selection 2010** - Rincon International Film Festival, Puerto Rico

**Special Screenings 2010** - Edinburgh's Film House

**Special Screening 2010** - Doc Lounge Lund Sweden

**Special Screening 2010** - Kino Sodran, Lund Sweden

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## **Website**

[www.thetruthaboutstolen.com](http://www.thetruthaboutstolen.com)

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## **Synopsis**

Filmmakers Ayala and Fallshaw follow Fetim Sellami, a Saharawi refugee, to North Africa for a reunion with her mother. Mother and child were separated when Sellami was a toddler. But the UN-sponsored reunion reveals a secret which spirals the film into a dark world the filmmakers could never have imagined. The black Saharawis start talking about a forbidden subject...Their enslavement.

The filmmakers recount moments of terror when their lives were in danger as well as the extreme hardships in getting the footage across borders. Perhaps most disturbingly, it becomes difficult to distinguish who are the good guys, as the 'good guys' turn bad and the 'bad guys' appear to do good.

Protestors have demonstrated against the accuracy of the film. The Polisario, the movement running the camp flew Sellami to the Sydney Film Festival to deny being a slave and that slavery exists in the camps.

Stolen is a compelling, modern-day, real-life cloak-and-dagger thriller.

## **Origins of Stolen**

We were in Mauritania making our first film and a woman approached Violeta. She told her, in Spanish, about the refugee camps where she comes from, just to the north.

She'd fled the Moroccan invasion of Western Sahara to live in refugee camps governed by the Polisario Liberation Front. She hadn't seen her family for more than 30 years.

For 100 years Western Sahara was a Spanish colony. In 1975 when Spain left Morocco took over and half the population fled with the Polisario Liberation Front to refugee camps in the Algerian desert. The Polisario, a nationalist organisation backed by Algeria, have been disputing control of Western Sahara with the Kingdom of Morocco for the last 34 years. A war lasted from 1975 to 1991, since then the conflict has remained in stalemate.

Since 2004, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees has organised family reunions for refugees in the camps and their families from the Western Sahara. There are 27,000 names on the UNHCR waiting list. For a family to be reunited it's akin to winning the lottery. These reunions are carried out by air, there is one flight per week and the reunions only last 5 days.

In September 2006, with the co-operation of the Polisario, we went to the camps to make a film about a family reunion. After 10 days of being introduced by Polisario officials to women who were to take part in a UN Family Reunion Program, we met Fetim, a black Saharawi that belongs to a minority group. The majority of the camp residents are of Arabic/ Berber descent.

Fetim has a teenage daughter, Leil, who speaks fluent Spanish. Fetim told us about being separated from her mother when she was 3 years old. We felt compelled to tell her story and asked her if she would like us to make a film, Fetim answered 'I would like that very much'.

## **Filming Stolen**

At first, making the film seemed straightforward. We had permission from the Polisario to go to the refugee camps and visas for Algeria. Then, the day we arrived in Algiers, two bombs exploded outside our hotel.

The first two trips to the camps went smoothly but when we discovered slavery on the third, everything changed.

From the moment the Polisario realised we were filming material they didn't like, they tried to stop us. They detained us and UN military officers came to negotiate our release. We hid our tapes in the desert, hoping that someone else could smuggle them out to a neighbouring country.

The Australian Embassy in Paris negotiated our release from Algeria; one of the most dangerous countries in the world. While trying to retrieve the tapes we were drawn into a political arm wrestle between the Polisario and Morocco. We had spies following us and in Morocco twenty hours of footage was stolen and swapped for blank tapes.

For 18 months it was just the two of us, our little cameras and no back up, with the Polisario and Morocco breathing down our necks.

## **Selected Reviews**

*"It's compelling to watch. You really have to see it to believe it. It's like a spy story."*

**ABC MOVIE TIME**

*"Pacy, exciting and hugely engrossing. Guaranteed to spark intense debate about the relationship between documakers and their subjects wherever it's shown."*

**Richard Kuipers, VARIETY**

*"Riveting stuff. The film moves into political thriller territory when the filmmakers are made suddenly aware that the conversations they have taped put the lives of their subjects in peril, and they themselves have become prey to sinister political and cultural forces."*

**Greg Quill, THE TORONTO STAR**

*"Stolen is a dramatic and complex exploration of modern slavery, not to mention a fascinating study of the perils of documentary filmmaking."*

**Jenny Punter, THE GLOBE AND MAIL**

*"A controversial exploration into the world of the Saharawi refugees"*

**Peter Knegt, INDIWIRE**

*"The thing about making documentaries is that you never know what you're going to get. In few cases is that more remarkable than in this one. There's no denying that it's fascinating, or that what it reveals is tremendously important."*

**Jennie Kermode, EYE FOR FILM UK**

*"The existence of modern slavery has been detailed in books like Kevin Bales's Disposable People, but rarely has it been covered on film as intimately as in Stolen."*

**Thom Powers, TORONTO IFF**

*"What began as an unassuming documentary has taken on the fate of a cause célèbre."*

**Richard Moore, MELBOURNE IFF**

*"Stolen is a brave film. Ayala and Fallshaw put themselves in danger to make it and shed light on this important issue."*

**Hannele Majaniemi, DOC POINT, HELSINKI**

*"A controversial film, that surprises you at first, shocks you in the middle and angers you by the end"*

**Michael Oliveira, SEM TEDIO, BRAZIL**

*"The film elicits a strong emotional response from viewers and deals with serious racial, social and economic divisions in Africa and the controversy it has generated will likely bring attention not only to the film, but also to the issues it film highlights."*

**Msia Kibona Clark, ALL AFRICA US**

For more reviews visit: [www.thetruthaboutstolen.com/press-room/reviews](http://www.thetruthaboutstolen.com/press-room/reviews)

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## Filmmaker Quotes

'Totally fascinating. A great piece of work'

**KEVIN MACDONALD, *Touching the Void, The Last King of Scotland (One day in September, Academy Award Winner 2000)***

'Stolen is much more than a film about modern slavery: it is a description of the crime that seems to follow humanity until it's end, the crime of ignorance. Congratulations to your work Ayala! It's useless to say, I could relate to most everything in it, to the characters in the desert as well as to you as filmmakers. I feel like i've been in and out of North Africa with you two people for some years. Your film is stronger than the stupid attempts to discredit it.'

**HUBERT SAUPER, *Darwin's Nightmare (Academy Award Nominee 2006)***

'Exciting film. In the Sahara, there is neither justice nor poetry'

**ANDERS ØSTERGAARD, *Burma VJ (Academy Award Nominee 2010)***

'Having seen so much of the footage, I can tell you that the filmmakers did not lie to or manipulate their subjects. They went to do one story but upon the realization of the issue of slavery, the film changed. The Polisario do not want this story out because it makes them look bad. And I believe they are using all means to discredit the filmmakers.'

**DEBORAH DICKSON (Three time Academy Award Nominee)**

'Violeta and Dan went to make a film about refugees, but soon realised there was a bigger story right under their noses. An important, hidden story that needed to be told to the world. The ordeal they went through to bring their raw material home in the teeth of opposition was extraordinary, and no less arduous has been the task of piecing it all together into a powerful and moving document. They have my complete admiration.'

**BOB CONOLLY (Academy Award Nominee)**

'Dan and Violeta told us the truth as they saw it and people risked their positions, trusted them to tell that truth hoping it might help. They were following a time-honoured tradition of being truly independent filmmakers. When the same slavery accusations proved true of the opposing side – the Polisario's enemies, the Moroccans, Violeta and Dan also exposed that.

They discovered early in their careers what it took me decades to see: the Left is just as capable of 'devouring its own babies' as the Right. Rather than facing the music and moving to right an ancient feudal custom, the Polisario have batted down the hatches and brought on board well intentioned but naïve PC supporters who out of a blind loyalty have done their best to undercut the veracity of Stolen and thus continue the practice of slavery in the refugee camps. This is a classic case of shoot the messengers.'

**DAVID BRADBURY (Two time Academy Award Nominee)**

## Human Rights Experts

### **FREE THE SLAVES, Prof. Kevin Bales - President**

'I have carefully reviewed the film *Stolen* with a view to assessing whether it is reasonable to accept the assertions of the film that instances of slavery exist in the refugee camps in the Western Sahara... The patterns of family relationships involving long-term enslavement described in the film match precisely those I have found just to the South of the Western Sahara, and which persist in Mauritania to this day. The nature and pattern of work done by black individuals in the film, the nature and pattern of their interaction with "white" families and individuals, the description of their treatment under informal rules of social participation and interaction, and the description of expectations of control by white individuals and families over black individuals and families, even when emancipation documents have been issued, all match patterns of interaction and hereditary enslavement I have observed and documented within the region. It is my opinion that the film *Stolen* portrays a situation of enslavement within the refugee camps of the Western Sahara, one that is not out of character with prevailing social patterns within the region.'

*Prof. Bales book 'Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy' was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, and published in ten languages. Desmond Tutu called it "a well researched, scholarly and deeply disturbing expose of modern slavery".*

### **ANTI-SLAVERY INTERNATIONAL, Romana Cacchioli - Africa Programme Coordinator**

'In January, along with my colleague Mariela Gonzalez, we were very pleased to meet Violeta and Dan in Madrid. The purpose of the visit was to discuss and view the footage of interviews claiming slavery in the Tindouf camps and Laayoune, Western Sahara. I was particularly keen to learn more, as I have been assisting a Mauritanian girl in Spain who claims she is a slave of a Saharawi family from the Tindouf camps, and because although we have had for a long time, suspicions of slavery continuing to exist we have not been able to verify. I am therefore particularly grateful to the journalists for allowing us to view the footage and to share it with Asim Turkawi my colleague on the Africa Programme responsible for Horn and East Africa with particular expertise on Sudan and also an Arab speaker and therefore able to verify the translation. Asim and I are of the opinion that the practices described in the interviews are consistent with slavery as it is practiced in neighbouring Mauritania and that the interviewees are credible.

I have read with much interest the statement issued by the Saharawi Republic (Polisario), as you know slavery is a sensitive and particularly thorny issue for States. The denials are regrettably a fairly typical response consistent with those of States including Mauritania (in the past), Niger and Sudan. It is also a common practice for states to put pressure on victims to retract their statements.'

*Anti-Slavery International is the world's oldest international human rights organisation and works exclusively against slavery and related abuses.*

### **HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, Eric Goldstein – Research Director of North Africa**

'In Sum, credible sources testified to Human Rights Watch about vestiges of slavery that continue to affect the lives of a portion of the black minority in the Tindouf camps. The practices involve historical ties between families that involve certain rights and obligations that are not always clear. Being a slave does not necessarily preclude enjoying freedom of movement. The issue of slavery in the Tindouf camps deserves closer scrutiny than Human Rights Watch has been able to undertake. It bears mentioning that Saharawis in the Moroccan controlled Western Sahara told us that residual practices of slavery can be found there, as well.'

*Human Rights Watch carried out an independent investigation and published a report in December 2008.*

## **U.S COMMITTEE FOR REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS, Merrill Smith - Director of International Planning and Analysis**

'Stolen is a surprising documentary. It starts as an intimate family drama in the admittedly heightened ambient tension of life in a refugee camp. The filmmakers many days of constant taping, however, eventually render them "hiding in plain sight," which allows the audience to be as a fly on the wall when an unexpected mystery begins to unfold. Sotto voce conversations caught off tape, the mute testimony of dry documents, the unspoken rationales of unyielding bureaucrats--all begin to accumulate to provide evidence, all the more credible for its banal circumstances and delivery, of what would otherwise be difficult to believe in the twenty-first century. Even activists who have been fighting against forced encampment (aka, human warehousing) as the all-too-often default fate of refugees for decades on end will be shocked. I thought I had seen it all. I hadn't.'

To read complete support letters go to <http://www.thetruthaboutstolen.com/facts>

## **Filmmaking Team Bios**

### **VIOLETA AYALA (Writer/Director/Producer/2<sup>nd</sup> Camera)**

Violeta Ayala is an award-winning filmmaker, writer and theatre performer from Bolivia. She has a BA in Journalism from Charles Sturt University in Australia. While at university she made her first documentary about the effects of cervical cancer on indigenous women in Bolivia. In 2006 Violeta began her collaboration with Dan Fallshaw in North Africa on BETWEEN THE OIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA, an investigative documentary about corruption in the oil industry. In 2007 Violeta and Dan made A VEGAN IN THE MEAT AISLE, a short drama selected for Tropfest.

In 2009, their first feature film STOLEN premiered internationally at the Toronto IFF and at IDFA in competition. 2010 saw STOLEN win best documentary at the Pan African FF at its US premiere and receive a special mention at its New Zealand premiere. STOLEN has been invited to more than 20 prestigious film festivals worldwide.

Violeta's new film was one of the 10 projects selected for the Berlinale 2010. She is developing a framework on documentary for the Australian Film Television Radio School and has given master-classes at the National Film and Television School in London and the Edinburgh College of Art. Violeta is a recipient of the Jan Vrijman Fund.

### **DAN FALLSHAW (Director/Producer/Editor/DOP)**

Dan studied Visual Communications at the University of Technology in Sydney and St Martins College in London. He worked in London and Germany as an Art Director and later in Italy as a film editor. In 2004 Dan returned to Australia to take up a position in the respected design department at SBS Television. Dan made his first documentary while at university, that looked at the lives of four women dealing with the consequences of chemotherapy. In 2006 he and Violeta Ayala created UNITED NOTIONS FILM, they travelled to Mauritania and made BETWEEN THE OIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA a documentary about corruption in the oil industry. In 2007 Dan directed A VEGAN IN THE MEAT AISLE a short drama and finalist in the competitive Tropfest.

Dan and Violeta have spent the last 3 years working on their first feature film, STOLEN, that premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival 2009 and has been selected for more than 20 prestigious festivals worldwide including IDFA. Recently Dan received the Best Editing Award at the Documentary Edge Festival in New Zealand for Stolen.

### **TOM ZUBRYCKI (Producer)**

Tom Zubrycki is one of Australia's most respected documentary filmmakers and has an impressive body of work with more than 30 films. In 2008 Tom was awarded the Cecil Holmes Award by the Australian Directors Guild for his creative output, as well as for his contribution to the film industry, especially his mentoring of emerging directors. Tom's films have premiered at film festivals from Berlin to Toronto. He has won two AFI Awards, the

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highest award in the Australian Film Industry with THE DIPLOMAT and KEMIRA–DIARY OF A STRIKE and an international Emmy for producing EXILE IN SARAJEVO. Tom is also known for films such as MOLLY & MOBARAK, HOMELANDS, BILLAL, STOLEN GENERATIONS, MAKING VENUS, THE PRODIGAL SON, A FIGHTING CHANCE, MAD MORRO, WANJA, THE INTERVENTION and more recently STOLEN.

#### **DEBORAH DICKSON (Producer)**

Deborah Dickson is an independent filmmaker who has had three films nominated for an Academy Award: FRANCES STELOFF: MEMOIRS OF A BOOKSELLER; SUZANNE FARRELL: ELUSIVE MUSE (co-directed with Anne Belle) and LALEE'S KIN, co-directed with long time colleague, Susan Froemke and legendary cinematographer Albert Maysles. She is also known for films such as THE EDUCATION OF GORE VIDAL; RUTHIE AND CONNIE; EVERY ROOM IN THE HOUSE; WITNESSES TO A SECRET WAR; the CARRIER series and ANOTHER DAY IN PARADISE. Dickson's films have premiered at film festivals from Sundance to Berlin and been shown on PBS, HBO and other major networks. She has been funded by American Film Institute, Sundance Documentary Fund and ITVS. She is on the faculty of the new masters program of social documentary film at the School of Visual Arts.

#### **JOHN MCDOWELL (Composer)**

Film composer John McDowell achieved worldwide recognition with his soundtrack to the Academy Award winning documentary BORN INTO BROTHELS, winner of Best Musical Score at the Bend Film Festival. Subsequent film scores by McDowell include ORGASMIC BIRTH: THE BEST KEPT SECRET, WHO DOES SHE THINKS SHE IS? and A SON'S SACRIFICE.

McDowell is also a highly gifted pianist, percussionist, producer, commissioned composer and instructor. McDowell served as founder, artistic director and leader of several musical projects including The Born Into Brothels Ensemble, the world music band Mamma Tongue. His touring and recording credits include: the platinum selling band Rusted Root, Krishna Das, and Ram Das. His solo CD Speaking the Mamma Tongue is featured on Raven Records and he was commissioned by Gaiam to create a CD for health and healing called Reflections. He has recently begun a piano/violin duo with the young Canadian violinist and composer Emmanuel Vukovich, who is also featured on the film STOLEN.

#### **JUSTINE MOYLE (Associate Producer)**

Justine Moyle has 10 years of radio and television experience worldwide. She has a degree in Media and Journalism from the University of Wisconsin, USA. In 2003 she worked for the BBC's radio 1 newsroom, covering the Iraq war with the world's best journalists. In 2004 Justine returned to Australia to produce TV commercials for Volkswagen, Carlton Breweries, QANTAS and Coca Cola. From 2005 to 2008 she worked with different production teams and produced Radio 2UE's morning and afternoon program, SBS's Pizza series, Australian Idol and Masterchef Australia. In 2009 Justine set up her own company, a creative consultancy specialising in film and music production. Stolen is Justine's first feature film as an associate producer and has been selected for the Toronto International Film Festival 2009.

#### **ELLEN PECK (Associate Producer)**

Ellen works as producer and creative/content advisor to documentary film, music and other projects in the arts associated with social and environmental issues, including the film and soundtrack for BORN INTO BROTHELS which garnered the Oscar for Best Documentary in 2005. She has worked with start-up non-profits and first-time capital campaigns, involved in both hands-on fundraising with individuals, corporations and foundations, and strategic planning for new initiative development.

## **STOLEN - Variety** By RICHARD KUIPERS

The potential of documentaries to turn out very different from what was originally intended is controversially demonstrated with "Stolen." Begun by the Aussie team of Violeta Ayala and Daniel Fallshaw as a record of a feel-good family reunion in a Western Saharan refugee camp, the docu suddenly about-faces into an expose of slavery. Guaranteed to spark intense debate about the relationship between documakers and their subjects wherever it's shown, this compelling item is ideal for willing fests and pubcasters.

The main subject of the film, Faitim Sellami, has since denounced Ayala and Fallshaw, claiming they falsely portrayed her as a slave. She became front-page news Down Under when flown in by supporters to attend the docu's world preem at the Sydney fest, monitored by security guards and with police stationed in the lobby. Fiery post-screening Q&A drew roughly equal parts praise and condemnation.

Docu is all smiles at first. A Saharawi refugee who lives in a camp in supporter state Algeria, Sellami is about to be reunited with the mother she hasn't seen since Morocco's 1975 invasion of Western Sahara. Ayala and Fallshaw have been invited to cover events by Polisario, the Western Saharan independence movement responsible for administration of the camps.

Barely five minutes into the film, the good vibes turn bad. Sellami's 15-year-old daughter, Leil, says she has a "white grandmother" who lives with them. The woman in question is Deido, an Arab who brought Sellami to the camp and is said to have owned the family 30 years ago but has since liberated them. Statements by Leil and other family members and friends appear contradictory and leave no doubt they believe officially outlawed slavery continues here and elsewhere in the region.

Following the arrival of Sellami's mother, Embarka, and sister Fatma, the filmmaking duo bury what they've shot in the desert and hotfoot it out of the camp.

The second half plays like an espionage thriller. Detained briefly in Algeria by the Polisario, Ayala and Fallshaw fly to Paris, where Mohammed Reda, a mysterious Moroccan, sets up an operation to smuggle the buried tapes to Casablanca. The road also takes them to New York and Geneva to fire questions at the U.N. High Commission for Refugees.

Using news coverage of talks between Morocco and the Polisario to emphasize the delicacy of everyone's PR machines at the time (mid-2007), Ayala also fields a frantic call from Leil. She reports police have come calling, and she accuses the filmmakers of coming to do good but doing bad instead.

While most viewers will need to Google plenty of names, histories and official reports to get the bigger picture, what's onscreen is pacy, exciting and hugely engrossing. Ayala and Fallshaw have done the right thing by including a text statement outlining Sellami's objections.

Tech credits are pro.

Camera (color/B&W, HD), Ayala, Fallshaw; editor, Fallshaw; additional editing, Deborah Dickson; music, John McDowell; sound, Ayala, Fallshaw; sound designer, William Lawlor; associate producers, Justine Moyle, Ellen Peck. Reviewed at Sydney Film Festival (competing), June 11, 2009. (Also in Melbourne Film Festival.) Running time: 76 MIN.