

PRESS BOOK

# SOY NERO

A FILM BY RAFI PITTS

 66<sup>e</sup> Internationale  
Filmfestspiele  
Berlin  
Competition



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# SOY NERO

## (I AM NERO)

A film by Rafi Pitts  
Feature film, Germany/France/Mexico 2016, 120 minutes

**PRESS BOOK**



## CREW

Director Rafi Pitts  
Writer Razvan Radulescu, Rafi Pitts  
Producer Thanassis Karathanos / Twenty Twenty Vision, Berlin  
Rita Dagher / Senorita Films, Paris  
Coproducer Nicolas Celis / Pimienta Films, Mexico City  
Director of Photography Christos Karamanis, GSC  
Casting Director Heidi Levitt, Lisa Essary  
Costume Designer Alexis Scott  
Production Designer Malak Khazai, Max Biscoe  
Music Rhys Chatham

## CAST

Nero	JOHNNY ORTIZ
Sgt. McLoud	RORY COCHRANE
Bronx	AML AMEEN
Compton	DARRELL BRITT-GIBSON
Jesus	IAN CASSELBERRY
Mercedes	ROSA FRAUSTO
Mohammed	KHLEO THOMAS
Police Officer	ALEX FROST
Seymour	MICHAEL HARNEY

## SYNOPSIS

Nero is running in the desert. He is trying to escape. He is running from the U.S. border patrol. He is captured. Nero is a 19-year-old deported Mexican. After several attempts Nero finally manages to return and make his way back into the Promised Land. He follows the trail of his hometown, Los Angeles, to find his older brother Jesus. Jesus has set himself up in a new life, living with a girl named Mercedes. Nero begins to realize that as an illegal immigrant, his chances of leading a regular life will not be easy to come by. In an ultimate attempt to escape his

desperate reality, Nero decides to enlist in the U.S. Army as a “Green Card Soldier”, a short cut to citizenship. Nero is lost in a maze, a desolate landscape, where the boundaries between the immigrant in uniform and the U.S. soldier are difficult to perceive. Although it soon becomes clear that while a soldier fights for a nation, the Green Card Soldier, Nero, fights to obtain his identity... SOY NERO.





## WRITER AND DIRECTOR: RAFI PITTS

Rafi Pitts' films have attained acclaim and awards around the globe. His first feature, *THE FIFTH SEASON*, was the first Franco-Iranian coproduction since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, and premiered in Venice. *SANAM* was hailed by French critics as the Iranian *THE 400 BLOWS*. In 2003 Pitts presented his controversial feature documentary *ABEL FERRARA NOT GUILTY* in Locarno. *IT'S WINTER* premiered in the Berlin Competition, and one year later, the Seattle International Film Festival honored Pitts with the Emerging Masters Award for his work. In 2010 Pitts' fifth feature *THE HUNTER* was also nominated for the Berlin Golden Bear. Born 1967 in Iran, Pitts spent his childhood in Tehran. During the war between Iran and Iraq, in 1981, he fled the country and moved to Britain. He graduated in 1991 from Harrow College – Polytechnic of Central London with a BA (Hons) Degree in Film and Photography. His first short, *IN EXILE*, was presented the same year at the London International Film Festival. In the 90s Pitts moved to Paris and worked on films by Leos Carax, Jacques Doillon and Jean-Luc Godard.

### Filmography (selection)

- 2016 *SOY NERO*, feature film
- 2010 *THE HUNTER* (Shekarchi), feature film
- 2006 *IT'S WINTER* (Zemestan), feature film
- 2003 *ABEL FERRARA: NOT GUILTY*,  
feature documentary
- 2000 *SANAM*, feature film
- 1997 *THE FIFTH SEASON* (Fasl-e Panjom),  
feature film
- 1994 *SALANDAR*, short
- 1991 *IN EXILE*, short

## INTERVIEW WITH RAFI PITTS

*Is the phenomenon of the Green Card Soldier an issue of debate in the U.S. and was that why you stumbled across it?*

Immigration exists in Europe, too. I didn't want to write a story about immigration that deals with only one country. I wanted to find the most absurd border and felt that this was the American one. The United States is a country of immigrants. Furthermore, California's economy is dependent on the Latino community and immigration, yet they've built a wall.

Our film also deals with the war in the Middle East, which involves a great number of countries. I didn't want to make a story about just one border or one country. It just seems that the American border is the most adequate one considering the times we're living in today, the world politics and world geopolitics. In the U.S. Army there are Green Card Soldiers from all over the world. American cinema surprisingly has never addressed this issue, even though the Green Card Soldiers have existed since the Vietnam War.

I should also point out that after the 9/11, Bush, after passing the „Patriot Act“, which deported illegal immigrants and reinforced the borders, also came up with the idea of the „Dream Act“. This meant that one could avoid deportation by joining the U.S. Army to become

a Green Card Soldier. Upon returning from a given war zone after 2 years you were given citizenship. The Obama administration rectified this. Under Obama you become an American citizen before you go out to fight in the Middle East. I think that Europeans as their friends can talk about it much more easily.

*The central character Nero moves through a wide range of geographically different settings. In earlier centuries such a voyage used to be a narrative pattern for an educational journey that ultimately led up to the construction of identity by finding one's place in the world. Can you relate to these kind of classic tales and what would be the difference to your film?*

Of course it's something I relate to because I am who I am – I have a British father, an Iranian mother and a French stepfather. I've always thought to myself that I come from the sole of my shoes. The absurdity of wanting to belong is something that I've always been naturally fascinated by as each country I came from insisted that I came from the other. Of course there's a need for mankind to belong, but if you look at what's going on in the world today – the fulfillment of this need has become an absurdity. In the second part, the film takes place in the desert. At first glance people might think that there are two stories. I actually strongly believe you're dealing with one story,

because they're an echo of each other. My character is being hunted down by the border patrol, then he becomes border patrol. It's a constant echo of what is going on in the deserts which basically are a no-man's-land. It's like the man on the moon if you like... who is in the film also with the character of Armstrong, walking through the desert in his anti-mine gear. There is an absurdity in men constantly thinking that they can conquer all. Indeed all the characters in our film have a need to belong and are lost within their identity.

*Your protagonist represents a group of people who are ready to give their lives in order to achieve national and thus individual identity. Their efforts and suffering in a war that takes place far away from the homeland, however, are socialised as a collective experience of a whole country. One might say that the deaths of these soldiers are the price for the nation state of the U.S. and its national identity. Why this interest in the United States?*

Because of it's multi-national side. It is a country of immigrants, the only people who are American are not in charge of America, that is to say the Native Indians. What I find fascinating about the United States is how hard they can be towards people who want to belong and become American – in the sense that Green Card Soldiers are not given American nationality before they fight but only after.

Green Card Soldiers only obtain it by either dying out there or returning from hell, if you like. I find this very violent. However, I never wanted to make a one-sided film, where it would become a story in which the Americans would be the bad guys and the immigrants the good. After all, at the end of the day there are a lot of young people, young Americans, who for the most part come from working-class backgrounds and they are fighting the same war. They are also fighting for survival needs. In their case it might not be gaining a nationality but rather gaining social security. Gaining a life which they don't necessarily have. They are all united to survive. I talked about this in great length with the co-writer, Razvan Radulescu, because I was obsessed with the idea that we're not making a film about an immigrant fighting the mean machine, or vice versa. We start from a point that I feel closest to from my own identity – the need of wanting to belong to a land. We start from the point of crossing a border and getting into trouble and the absurdity of it all. That's personal in a way. But it's also universal in a sense that any individual is in desperate need to belong and might come to a place, where we're all in the same chaos, each for their own individual reason. This is the reality of war.

*How do you transform this geographical problem into the structure of the film?*

As a filmmaker I believe in the construction or should I say architecture within a film. It's something I started in IT'S WINTER, then THE HUNTER and I'm continuing with SOY NERO. In THE HUNTER there was also a notion of the film being echoed within the two sides of the story. In SOY NERO I've made the landscape and identity or location disappear by reducing the more detailed echoes that are much more direct: the border patrol at the beginning and the border patrol in the second half. The captured young immigrant in the beginning and the young immigrant that is captured in the end. It's a story of someone getting to the gates of heaven but being kicked back into the gates of hell.

*The nation as a symbolic force and the nation as a military force could be said to structure the two main parts of SOY NERO – in Los Angeles and at war. For the protagonist they seemed to be linked by an inviolable logic which I had the feeling is the major source of irony in the film. Why don't you trust this connection?*

Well, it's not just the symbolic. The film opens with two bodies running, two Mexicans, running in the desert. The part of the villa follows. The villa itself is one day Mexican, the next American. Yet it's the same place. One day Latino music, the next day, American. Yet we stay in the same landscape. For me that is very important within the architectural structure of our film. When we go back to

the desert we meet two individuals again. Only this time in military uniform. This brings Mexico and America into the same landscape – like the villa, because on one day it belongs to Mexicans, the next Americans. Yet it's the same landscape. I think that a Mexican standing in the Middle Eastern desert will feel more at home than a guy from the Bronx standing in that same desert. Ironically, the Mexican feels more at home in this foreign landscape than the American.

*The architecture and the spaces you build in the film seem to be very precise in this film and at the same time every scene is located in a non-space, especially borders. What do these borders mean for the protagonist? And for the narrative of the film?*

For me borders are crossings, they're sequences in a way – also in filmmaking. So there's some relation between them. But what I'm also a little bit obsessed with, is the desert in Los Angeles itself. In American cinema you never see it as a deserted landscape. For some strange reasons American cinema tends to always put extras in every single shot. But when you're walking down the streets in Los Angeles, there's hardly anybody there, it's just you and your shadow, unless you go to the tourist spots like the Kodak Theatre. Often when you're walking on the street, you're on your own, you're a silhouette. Cars will look at you, because you



seem strange, walking that kind of distance.

And like in all my films there is also the maze in a deserted landscape. In THE HUNTER it's in the woods, which is a more obvious maze. Here in the desert it is a stranger maze in which there are different notions of borders. Nero is not the only guy within borders. The two black guys come from the same country and they're of the same colour, yet they don't come from the same American culture. One is from the East Coast, the other from the West. That's why I bring in the rap culture and the absurdity of the hatred within it. It's a way of bringing about the borders that exist within their own minds and within their own country.

*Speaking of borders. As the border patrol's job is ultimately the selection of those who may or may not pass you as a director also construct borders in your film where you decide for things to become visible and for others to stay in the dark. Is this in your opinion something that makes cinema political?*

I think, there's always something political about cinema because choices are political. There's a very fine line between taking sides of different views – political views – or taking sides on human beings and their condition. I've always been obsessed with the guy on the street. I never had much interest for politicians. For me it's always

been about the average guy and how he can survive in a situation that he's been governed by or should I say marginalised by. Not necessarily the political party that's governing him, but what's been brought upon him by society.

In a film, more than anything, there needs to be several different layers within the story, the script, the characters. As an example, I could say a second layer is brought to a film by the actors with their own reality, their own personality. Then there's the way we shoot it. The way we re-write with the camera. The architecture, the way you frame a film, that becomes a further layer. The editing. The sound becomes another layer. Simplified, yes, but at the end of the day, it's this obsession of trying to enhance it. To re-write it at each stage. Jean-Pierre Melville said something that I really like. They asked him once: "So, for you, when you make a film, story is the most important thing, isn't it?" And Melville's response was: "Well, the script is 50 percent of the film." And then he said: "The casting is 50 percent of the film." Then he said, "The cinematography is 50 percent of the film. Editing is 50 percent and maybe sound is 50 percent" and then he said, "As you notice there's a lot of 50 percents running about." But what I mean to say by this, is that if any of those elements is missing or isn't good enough, the film

is losing 50 percent. That is filmmaking. This is from a very old interview, I think from 1967. But it's the truth of filmmaking.

*In every national history writers, filmmakers and artists have contributed an essential part to the process of building a nation. In how far do you relate your work to nations or specific nations?*

For me, film or the arts in general, of course, all come from a cultural background. But the beauty in all of them is that they don't have borders. That's the first thing that I have noticed in film or art in general. In Iran we understand Fassbinder, we understand Welles, Ford, Hawks or Fellini, Pasolini, Antonioni, we understand the French or the Japanese. The other way around, you understand us. I think when a film is sincere, there are no borders. I'm not talking about world cinema because I don't like that term at all. But any film that is sincere, coming from a human emotion in its first position is universally understandable. And for me that's art itself. Motion in emotion.





## WRITER: RAZVAN RADULESCU

Razvan was born in Bucharest. He studied Philology at the University of Bucharest and Opera Directing at the Music Academy of Bucharest. As a student he became a member of the Letters, an important center for young aspiring writers, at the time directed by Mircea Cartarescu. He published his first novel in 1995. "Tablou Familie" received a warm welcome from the critics and won the Best Debut Prize by the Romanian Writers Guild. His second novel was well received as well, "Teodosicel Mic". As a screenwriter he worked on many different projects. Especially, he collaborated with Christian Mungiu on 4 MONTH, 3 WEEKS AND 2 DAYS (Palme d'Or, Cannes 2007), with Christian Puiu on THE DEATH OF DANTE LAZARESCU (2005) or with Sylvie Michel on OUR LITTLE DIFFERENCES (2012). He worked as a cowriter on three projects with Radu Muntean: THE PAPER WILL BE BLUE (2006), BOOGIE (2008) and MARTI DUPRA CACIUM (2010).

### Filmography (selection)

- 2016 SOY NERO, directed by Rafi Pitts
- 2013 CHILD'S POSE, directed by Calin Peter Netzer
- 2012 OUR LITTLE DIFFERENCES, directed by Sylvie Michel
- 2010 MARTI DUPRA CACIUM, directed by Radu Muntean
- SHELTER, directed by Dragomir Sholev
- 2008 BOOGIE, directed by Radu Muntean
- 2007 DER GEKÖPFTE HAHN, directed by Radu Gabrea
- 4 MONTHS, 3 WEEKS, 2 DAYS, directed by Christian Mungiu
- 2006 THE PAPER WILL BE BLUE, directed by Radu Muntean
- LOVE STICK, directed by Tudor Giurgiu
- OFFSET, directed by Didi Danquart
- 2004 THE DEATH OF DANTE LAZARESCU, directed by Christi Puiu
- 2003 NIKI ET FLO, directed by Lucian Pintilie
- 2001 GOODS AND MONEY, directed by Christi Puiu

## MILITARY ADVISOR / TECHNICAL ADVISOR: DANIEL TORRES

Daniel Torres worked as the military advisor to Rafi Pitts for SOY NERO. His story is one of the true stories behind the film. Torres, born in Mexico, served as a U.S. Marine in Iraq. Torres' parents came to the United States legally. By overstaying their visas, they left Torres without a Green Card. However, in 2007 a Marine Corps recruiter in Idaho did not look too closely at the formalities. Although Daniel Torres' birth certificate was missing, he was allowed to submit it later – a fake one though – and join the U.S. Army. He spent 2009 in Iraq, near Fallujah. When his unit came home and prepared for an operation in Afghanistan, Torres lost his ID. He tried to get it replaced, and his story fell apart. Instead of going to Afghanistan Torres was deported to Tijuana, Mexico, unable to return. There he is currently taking college courses aiming to become a lawyer and hoping to return to the United States one day.

## ABOUT GREEN CARD SOLDIERS

The U.S. Military is filled with Americans looking to make a difference in the world. But it also includes many people who cannot claim the United States as their home country. According to the U.S. Centre of Naval Analyses, 8,000 non-citizens enlist in the U.S. Armed Forces every year. Many join hoping to gain citizenship for themselves and their families. They're often called Green Card Soldiers. In the U.S. Army, non-citizens can fight and die to obtain an adopted country. U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan include a "few thousands that are still Green Card holders who are not even citizens of this country" (John McCain). Many of the troops on duty in Iraq do not count English as their first language and would prefer to take orders in their native tongue... usually Spanish. In 2012 the Associated Press reported there were close to 17,000 non-citizens on active duty. Part of the draw for non-citizen recruits is a faster track to citizenship than for civilians, the product of a policy changed after September 11, 2001 intended to boost military ranks. A 2002 presidential order allowed non-citizens serving in the military to apply for expedited citizenship. A record number of U.S. Military members were naturalized in 2012, the most since 1955. Non-citizen soldiers were among the first military

casualties in Iraq, among them Marine Lance Corporal José Gutierrez of Lomita, an immigrant from Guatemala who died on March 31, 2003. U.S. citizen and non-citizen soldiers of colour in general are well represented among military casualties. According to the Spanish-language newspaper “El Tiempo Latino”, there have been more deaths recorded of Latino military members in Iraq than of other minorities in the armed forces. But death in combat affects all.

## THE CHARACTERS

**Nero** (JOHNNY ORTIZ) represents a great majority of youth today who, regardless of the American dream, have no other choice but to escape their own economic borders and countries, in the vain hope to obtain a better life. Immigrants that are prepared to die if a change doesn't come. Nero decides to immigrate to the United States. This is his only chance at improving his life. Nero wants to become a Green Card Soldier. He believes being a part of the military will give him the sense of being a part of something greater. He wants to be accepted by America. He believes this will bring him honour and help him become someone whom people respect. Nero wants to be a part of a nation that he feels rejected his fellow brothers so much. This experience is what many Green Card Soldiers share. By serving in the U.S. Military they feel themselves to be part of America. Plus, Green Card Soldiers are eligible for GI benefits, just like other soldiers. Although Nero risks only becoming an American citizen after he is killed in combat, he is still prepared to take a chance. For Nero, it's all or nothing.

**Jesus** (IAN CASSELBERRY) is Nero's brother who has settled down in Los Angeles. Together with his girlfriend Mercedes he welcomes Nero in an impressive Beverly Hills villa that fulfills every dream one could possibly have of American life. To Nero it seems like the perfect place to start his new life.

**Bronx** (AML AMEEN) is an Afro-American aged 21, born and raised on the East Coast in Harlem, New York City.

**Compton** (DARRELL BRITT-GIBSON) also of Afro-American origin, aged 20, born and raised on the West Coast in South Central Los Angeles.

**Sergeant McLoud** (RORY COCHRANE) is white, of Irish origin, aged 40, born and raised in Austin, Texas. He chose the army as a career. He has grown a beard, gone rogue, as he was most likely demoted.

**Mohammed** (KHLEO THOMAS) Arab-American aged 22, born and raised in Dearborn, Michigan. At least

15,000 Muslims, including about 3,500 Arab-Americans, are already in U.S. Military uniform. In fact, Arab-Americans have been fighting and dying for the United States since 1776. However many Arab-American soldiers say, many years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, they still feel they need to prove both their worth as soldiers, and their loyalty to the United States.



SOY NERO / JIMMY TRINIDAD / F&A

## CAST

### NERO: JOHNNY ORTIZ

The newcomer Johnny Ortiz played in *STRIKE ONE* (2014) by David Llauger Meiselman and alongside Kevin Costner in *MCFARLAND, USA* (2015) by Niki Caro, followed by the TV-series *AMERICAN CRIME*.

#### Filmography (selection)

2016 SOY NERO  
 2015 AMERICAN CRIME (TV series)  
 2015 MCFARLAND, USA  
 2014 STRIKE ONE

### SEYMOUR: MICHAEL HARNEY

Michael Harney was born in the Bronx in New York. He studied with the acting teachers William Esper and Phil Gushee. After studying acting he run The Michael Harney Acting Studio in New York. He acted in and directed numerous plays and starred in "On The Waterfront" on Broadway. He played the role of Detective Mike Roberts in the TV series *NYPD BLUE* for several seasons and appeared in a variety of film and television projects, such

as *LAW & ORDER* and *EMERGENCY ROOM*, including *ERIN BROCKOVICH* and *OCEAN'S THIRTEEN*, both directed by Steven Soderbergh. Michael Harney also starred in the TV series *ORANGE IS THE NEW BLACK*.

#### Filmography (selection)

2016 SOY NERO  
 2015 BAD HURT  
 2013 - 2015 ORANGE IS THE NEW BLACK  
 (TV series)  
 2014 TRUE DETECTIVE (TV series)  
 2012 - 2013 VEGAS (TV series)  
 2010 PERSONS UNKNOWN (TV series)  
 2007 OCEAN'S THIRTEEN  
 2007 CAPTIVITY  
 2005 - 2006 DEADWOOD (TV series)  
 2000 ERIN BROCKOVICH  
 1993 - 1999 NYPD BLUE (TV series)  
 1992 - 1997 LAW & ORDER (TV series)

## BRONX: AML AMEEN

Aml Ameen is a British actor of Caribbean descent, born in London. He has been working professionally from the age of six. His performance in KIDULTHOOD earned him a nomination for “Best Newcomer“ at the 2006 Screen Nation Awards. He also played a role in the BAFTA Award winning TV series THE BILL which led to his Screen Nation Award for “Best Actor“ in 2007. Aml Ameen appeared in Lee Daniel’s critically acclaimed and award winning feature THE BUTLER. He was a lead in THE MAZE RUNNER by Wes Ball and co-starred with Jennifer Lopez and Viola Davis in LILA & EVE.

### Filmography (selection)

2016 SOY NERO  
2015 LILA & EVE  
2014 THE MAZE RUNNER  
2014 BEYOND THE LIGHTS  
2013 THE BUTLER  
2011 - 2012 HARRY’S LAW (TV series)  
2006 KIDULTHOOD  
2002 - 2007 THE BILL (TV series)

## COMPTON: DARRELL BRITT-GIBSON

Darrell Britt-Gibson was born in Maryland, USA. He studied theater at the University of Maryland and made his acting debut in the HBO TV series THE WIRE followed by roles in TV series such as CALIFORNICATION or YOU’RE THE WORST.

### Filmography (selection)

2016 SOY NERO  
2014 - 2015 YOU’RE THE WORST (TV series)  
2014 POWER (TV series)  
2014 CALIFORNICATION (TV series)  
2006 - 2008 THE WIRE (TV series)

