



SEEN & HEARD: DARING FEMALE COMING-OF-AGE FILMS

Rafiki

The first Kenyan film to be selected for Cannes, *Rafiki* was banned in its home country last year – not for its lesbian content per se, but for its tone of hopefulness. The censors, director Wanuri Kahiu has sardonically explained, felt that the movie’s lesbian characters should have shown more remorse.

Kahiu was looking to make a love story when she discovered Monica Arac de Nyeko’s ‘Jambula Tree’. She and co-writer Jenna Bass have now adapted the short story for the screen – but the resulting film is more than a universal tale of love. Specifically, it is about two young black lesbians in Kenya; it was always going to be political, Kahiu has said – as any onscreen relationship that diverts from a white, straight, Western paradigm inevitably will be. And yet ‘Jambula Tree’ has been described by literary judges as ‘witty and mischievous’, and the film shares this spirit. Its origins in a short story give it a refreshing sparsity, an emotional realism conjured by a lingering narrative. Our attention is allowed to drift rather than insistently directed to incessant plot details.

In the opening credits we are launched straight into the film’s pop aesthetic – what Kahiu calls her ‘Afrobubblegum’ style – with a collage of patterns and photographic cut-outs that spiral and jive to the beat of Muthoni Drummer Queen’s ‘Suzie Noma’. When we first meet one of the leads, Kena (Samantha Mugatsia), she is on her skateboard, flashing past people and buildings, the pink-orange highlights of her T-shirt picked up in an array of visual details – a painted building, the pieces of a draughts board. She is preoccupied by the repeated motifs of communal life: guiding her best friend Blacksta (Neville Misati) in his romantic exploits; hanging out at the local street café; helping her father John (Jimmi Gathu) in his convenience store. When she meets Ziki (Sheila Munyiva), colours

Samantha Mugatsia, Sheila Munyiva explode even more vibrantly on to the screen, Ziki’s purple lipstick and bright pink braids dominating the film’s whole colour palette.

As in comparable urban films such as Alex Sichel’s *All Over Me* (1997) and Dee Rees’s *Pariah* (2011), the girls’ burgeoning romance is consistently framed by the streets around them. But then we are suddenly thrown from the hustle and bustle into scenes of intense intimacy. In the moments leading up to Kena and Ziki’s first kiss, and then again before they first have sex, the soundtrack becomes unhinged from the image – words and sighs and touches slip out of sync; jump cuts replicate the disorientating effects of desire.

This is a beautiful film. It is political, yes, whether in its protagonist’s strident refusals to yield to pressure or her quietly sympathetic encounters with a young man who has long been the victim of homophobic abuse. But the performances of the two central actors, and their irresistible chemistry, makes the film not only serious but also playful. *Rafiki* revels in the lightness of love’s discovery while demanding we bear witness to the intolerable prejudice that sometimes greets it.

Clara Bradbury-Rance, *Sight and Sound*, June 2019

Kenya's growing film industry is unusual in having more well-known female than male filmmakers – among them Wanuri Kahiu, whose latest feature, *Rafiki*, last year became the first Kenyan film to be selected for Cannes, in the Un Certain Regard section. Her first fiction feature, *From a Whisper* (2008), tells the story of a young woman searching for her missing mother in the chaotic aftermath of the twin bombings of the US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998. In 2009 she directed the short *Pumzi* – hailed as the first Kenyan sci-fi film – in which a young woman tries to escape an underground compound after World War III (the 'Water Wars') has rendered much of the world a desolate post-apocalyptic landscape. *Rafiki*, a tender lesbian love story, was immediately banned by the Kenya Film Classification Board upon its release – homosexuality is illegal in Kenya. Kahiu successfully sued the Board at the Kenyan high court, winning a suspension of the ban for one week last September, a brief window in which tens of thousands of Kenyans flocked to cinemas to see the film.

Kahiu is the founder of Afrobubblegum, a Nairobi-based media company which supports and creates 'fun, fierce and frivolous' African art. Given its subject matter, and the real danger to queer people in Kenya's legal context, 'fun and frivolous' might seem like odd words to apply to *Rafiki*. But the film's feminine aesthetic and the innocence of the developing relationship between its two young protagonists retain a playfulness and lightness.

Rafiki means 'friend' in Kiswahili: the word hints at the necessity to disguise a same-sex romance as platonic friendship in an intolerant social environment. Both the female leads, Kena (Samantha Mugatsia) and Ziki (Sheila Munyiva), are conspicuous in their individualism and style: Kena is tomboyish, and Ziki stands out in radiant pink and purple braids, youthful bubble skirts and wittily sloganed T-shirts. The film's representations of modern urban youth culture and femininity are noteworthy, and there is a freshness to its depictions of identity. This is a female-centred 'Afropop' style which is further underlined by the film's soundtrack of hip-hop and pop music exclusively featuring female African musicians.

Kahiu has cited Marcel Camus's *Black Orpheus* (1959) and Mélanie Laurent's *Breathe* (2014) as stylistic influences, along with the work of black female artists whose aesthetics celebrate female sexuality, beauty and power: African-American visual artist Mickalene Thomas, South African queer photographer Zanele Muholi and Kenyan-born visual artist Wangechi Mutu.

It took Kahiu and her producers seven years to put together the financing for the film, a co-production between seven countries – her perseverance is a testament to her desperation to tell the story. In interviews Kahiu has speculated that the struggle to find money might have been due to potential funders' fear of offending African governments. It is true that there is a widespread perception in the West that homophobia in Africa is pervasive – a perception fed by, for example, the attempt by the Ugandan government in 2014 to make homosexuality punishable by death (the legislation was struck down by the courts). But debates around LGBT+ issues in Africa are complex, and an understanding of histories, cultures and local contexts is crucial.

More and more African activists are speaking out against homophobia and the persecution of people who express non-heteronormative sexual identities, and fiction films and documentaries on LGBT+ themes have proliferated in recent years. *Dakan*, directed by Mohamed Camara from Guinea, addressed

male homosexuality as long ago as 1997. Since then there have been the South African features *Beauty* (2011) and *The Wound* (2017); the documentaries *Call Me Kuchu* (2012) and *God Loves Uganda* (2013), both about Uganda’s dangerous homophobic environment; and *Stories of Our Lives* (2014), an anthology of five short films dramatising real-life stories of LGBT+ people in Kenya, constructed through interviews. The film was directed by Jim Chuchu and created by the Nairobi-based Nest Collective – to begin with, individual members of the collective remained anonymous in the credits, because of the country’s laws against homosexuality.

Kahiu has argued that homophobia, rather than homosexuality, is un-African: it goes against the tolerance and unity embedded in the concept of *ubuntu* – a humanist philosophy emphasizing community and connection. She wants the film to stimulate hope for a more tolerant, safe and just society, and has argued that this is in keeping with the spirit of the Kenyan national anthem and the constitution adopted in 2010, which promote peace, love and unity. *Rafiki* advocates individualism, difference, tolerance and understanding, a love story that has not been told or heard enough in Africa, presenting characters that African youth can identify with. ‘To see young people in love from the continent is so glorious, and it’s so needed,’ Kahiu has said.

In February, *Rafiki*’s star Samantha Mugatsia won the Best Actress Award at Fespaco, Africa’s biggest and oldest film festival, in Ouagadougou, capital of Burkina Faso. At the time, Kahiu tweeted: ‘We have the RIGHT to tell our stories, because they are precisely that – OURS. We have the RIGHT to have all voices heard because they are OURS. We have the RIGHT to create, because that’s how we share our humanity with the rest of the world.’

Lizelle Bisschoff, *Sight & Sound*, May 2019

RAFIKI

Director: Wanuri Kahiu
Executive Producer: Tim Headington
Producer: Steven Markovitz
Co-producers: Marie-Pierre Macia, Claire Gadéa, Georges Schoucair, Ruben Thorkildsen, Verona Meier, Reinier Selen, Gerhard Meixner, Roman Paul, Wanuri Kahiu, Tamsin Ranger
Casting Director: Nini Wacera
Writer: Wanuri Kahiu
Co-writer: Jenna Bass
Based on the short story ‘Jambula Tree’ by: Monica Arac de Nyeko
Director of Photography: Christopher Wessels
Editor: Isabelle Dedieu
Additional Editing: Ronelle Loots
Production Designer: Arya Laloo
Sound Recordist: Frederic Salles

Cast

Samantha Mugatsia (*Kena*)
Sheila Munyiva (*Ziki*)
Jimmi Gathu (*John Mwaura*)
Nini Wacera (*Mercy*)
Dennis Musyoka (*Peter Okemi*)
Patricia Amira (*Rose Okemi*)
Blacksta Neville Misati (*Blacksta*)
Muthoni Gathecha (*Mama Atim*)
Nice Githinji (*Nduta*)
Charlie Karumi (*Waireri*)
Vitalis Waweru (*Tom*)
Hellen Aura (*Elizabeth*)
Githae Njogu (*pastor*)

Kenya/South Africa/France/Lebanon/Norway/ Netherlands/Germany/USA
2018
82 mins

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Rafiki
Mon 14 Feb 18:20; Fri 18 Feb 18:00; Wed 23 Feb 20:30
It Felt Like Love
Wed 16 Feb 20:30
Fish Tank
Sat 19 Feb 20:40
Mustang
Sat 26 Feb 13:40
House of Hummingbird (Beolsae)
Sat 26 Feb 17:40
In Between Days
Sat 26 Feb 20:40

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