

Son of the Soil review – bone-crunching Lagos revenge thriller with bruising swagger

Razaaq Adoti writes and stars in this scrappy gangland action romp, mixing Nollywood energy with bloody set pieces and a dash of 80s-style grit

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You have to respect an action film that has its protagonist stagger out of the intensive-care ward into an open-air street market in a backless hospital gown, his tackle whacking conspicuously against the fabric. Star Razaaq Adoti can't blame his agent, as it was the actor himself who scripted this Nigeria-set revenge thriller, in which his former special forces soldier makes a Jack Carter-like return to wreak havoc on the mean streets of Lagos.

Zion (Adoti) has made the US his home after being dishonourably discharged and doing a stretch in the slammer. But he makes a beeline for Lagos when he receives an SOS message from his sister Ronke (Sharon Rotimi), a hotel chambermaid who stumbles on respectable medical professional cum evil drug kingpin Dr Baptiste (Philip Asaya) as he murders a sex worker. Zion is too late: Ronke is a goner, framed as another victim of the fentanyl cocktail Matrix that's doing the rounds, courtesy of the bad doctor. Time for Zion to dust off his particular set of skills.

These turn out in large part to be him walking obliviously into ill-advised locales and getting an absolute beating. But despite Zion's boneheaded brand of heroism, a lot of plot-facilitating character choices and outbreaks of ripe Nollywood acting, British-Chinese director Chee Keong Cheung delivers a pretty satisfying and fleet-footed ride here. All the more so for going fairly skimpy on the characterisation in the manner of 80s action flicks: Zion gets a cute street urchin sidekick (Ijelu Folajimi), just so we know he's on the side of the angels.

Even Zion's inexplicably haphazard street smarts line up somehow with the shambolic, brutal world he infiltrates: an impressive selection of immolations,

bludgeonings and machete-gougings is meted out once he teams up with albino ganglord Jagunlabi (Damilola Ogunsi). Cheung's direction matches it with gusto, recalling City of God in a colourful handheld blitz – though his fondness for the Dutch angle gets a bit annoying. He uses it so often they'll have to rename it the Nigerian angle, but his film has got an undeniable gangsta lean.

Son of the Soil is in UK cinemas from 5 December.