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Rafiki (12a)

Dir: Wanuri Kahiu

Starring: Samantha Mugatsia, Sheila Muniyiva

Sponsor: Dr Roderick Ørner

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Synopsis: Nairobi, the present. Teenager Kena lives with her mother Mercy and hangs out with her best friend Blacksta. She meets Ziki, daughter of Peter Okemi, a politician running against Kena's father John Mwaaura, in a local election. They become friends and then, secretly, lovers.. The community notices and disapproves. The girls find solace in a deserted campervan away from town. Ziki's friends fight with Kena. When Ziki takes Kena home to care for her, her mother sees them kissing. The pair hide out in the camper van and try to imagine their future. However, a local gossip brings a violent crowd to the van, and they are both beaten and taken to the police station as criminals. When their parents come to collect them, Kena tries to speak to Ziki; the latter refuses to acknowledge her. John helps Kena confront her mother who is furious. The Pastor and the community stage a ritual to cleanse Kena. She later finds that her father's campaign has failed and his business is faltering. Ziki is sent to London and refuses to reconcile with Kena

Years later Kena is working as a doctor. She learns that Ziki has returned. They meet at the top of a hill overlooking the town.

The first Kenyan film to be selected for Cannes, *Rafiki* was banned in its home country in 2018 – not for its lesbian content per se, but for its tone of hopefulness. The censors, director Wanuri Kahiu has sardonically explained, felt the movie's lesbian characters should have shown more remorse.

Kahiu was looking to make a love story when she discovered Monica Arac de Nyeto'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 2 young black lesbians in Kenya; it was always going to be political, Kahiu has said - as any on-screen 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, and emotional realism conjured by a lingering narrative. 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 'Suzi 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 cafe; helping her father John (Jimmi Gathu) in his convenience store. When she meets Ziki (Sheila Muniyiva), colours explode even more vibrantly on 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 moment 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's been the victim of homophobic abuse. But the performances of the two central actors, and their irresistible chemistry, make 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.

Credits

Kena	Samantha Mugatsia
Ziki	Sheila Muniyiva
Blacksta	Neville Misati
Nduta	Nice Githinji
Waineri	Charlie Karumi
Mama Atim	Mutoni Gathecha
Tom	Vitalis Waweru
Elizabeth	Hellen Aura
John Mwaaura	Jimmi Gathu
Director	Wanuri Kahiu
Screenplay	Wanuri Kahiu, Jenna Bass
Director of Photography	Christopher Wessels
Editor	Isabelle Dedieu
Production design	Arya Laloo
Sound	Frédéric Salles
Costume	Wambui Thimba
	S.Africa/Kenya/France/Lebanon/ Germany/Norway/The Netherlands/USA/Sweden 2019
	82 mins

Another View

Banned on its home ground because according to the authorities "it promotes homosexuality," the first Kenyan film to be chosen for the Cannes official selection is a touching and brave portrayal of the relationship between two young women from the same Nairobi housing estate.

Based on a prize-winning story by Ugandan writer Monica Arac de Nyeko, the film depicts the blossoming and intoxicating affair between Kena and Ziki which blinds them to the dangers lurking all around them as well as the reactions of their respective families.

Samantha Mugatsia plays the androgynous Kena, who awaits the results of her school exams to enable her to continue her training as a nurse. Her father John is a neighbourhood shopkeeper who is running for political office as "a man of the people." He's separated from her mother, a teacher, and we discover that his new partner is expecting a child.

The eye-catching Ziki (Sheila Muniyiva), with her colourful hair, whose father is a political rival of Kena's dad, comes into her field of vision and the two embark on a friendship and more.

They develop their affection for each other almost under cover, stealing kisses and caresses in clubs and in an abandoned van which has become their "romantic" hide-out.

When their romance is discovered they are horrendously attacked by a group of youths, which forces their families to reassess their attitudes towards their sexuality.

Rafiki (which means friend) benefits from the chemistry between the two leads as well as an unpretentious and courageous approach to a subject that incredibly remains volatile and hostile in Kenya.

Wanuri Kahiu's courageous directorial approach deserves praise and support - and a wider exposure outside of the confines of the Cannes Film Festival, not least in Kenya itself.

Richard Mowe: Eye for Film

Another Another View

The Kenyan government had already banned Wanuri Kahiu's second feature, Rafiki, before it even premiered in Cannes. Telling the story of a pair of young women who fall in love only to be ostracised by their local community, the government feared it would "promote lesbianism" which remains illegal in Kenya. All of which has only added to anticipation for the film.

Stories concerning forbidden, star-crossed love are now regular fare at film festivals, with Todd Haynes' Carol playing at Cannes only three years ago. Yet, while the premise of Rafiki is well-worn, the context of the film is not and Kahiu brings fresh zest to a familiar story which is told with spirit. This is partly due to captivating performances by the two newcomers, Samantha Mugatsia and Sheila Muniyiva.

Based on the short story Jambula Tree by Ugandan writer Monica Arac de Nyeko (which was also banned), the story centres on Kena (Samantha Mugatsia). A tomboy by nature, she spends her free time skating around her brightly coloured town, hanging out with her friend Blacksta (Neville Misati), and working for her father John (Jimmy Gathu), a shopkeeper and aspiring politician. She also does her best to avoid the local town gossip, Mama Atim (Muthoni Gathecha).

Kahiu paints the local environment vividly and the backdrop is full of colourful characters, ranging from homophobic barflies to girls practicing dance routines on the street. One such girl is Ziki (Sheila Muniyiva), the daughter of John's political rival in the local elections. With her neon braids and lust for life, she quickly catches the eye of Kena, who still remains unsure of her sexuality.

Rafiki shines in depicting the young lovers' blossoming feelings. They discuss their dreams - Kena wants to be a nurse, Ziki thinks she should dream bigger and become a doctor. They dance in nightclubs covering each other in neon paint, but it is the moment of their first kiss that captures the heart. Muniyiva and Mugatsia's chemistry is beguiling, seen through fleeting, loving glances and tender caresses.

However, as you might expect in such a story, their love is soon exposed. Mama Atim, expertly portrayed by Gathecha who brings a full-blooded bigotry to her performance, leads a gang of locals to drag the girls from their secret getaway. Beaten and bruised, their parents intervene, trying to keep them apart. In these respects, the film falls into a fairly conventional narrative. Nevertheless, the vibrant context of the film allows this familiar story feel fresh.

Running at only an hour and twenty minutes, Kahiu sometimes allows the plotting to go too broad. The decision to pepper scenes with music from Njoki Karu and Muthoni Drummer Queen adds energy, but on occasion wanders into more sentimental territory. While Kahiu's film may have its flaws, there is no denying the power and passion poured into the project. It would take a callous heart not to fall for the charms of the leads, and the urgency of the story.

Joseph Walsh: Cinevue

Our next screening: February 21st. 7.30pm Rojo (Argentina 2019. Cert 15)

Late 20th century South American history continues to provide a rich seam to be mined for political thrillers, and Rojo is no exception. Our second new release film (in cinemas last September), it's set in the mid 1970's immediately before the military coup. A veneer of respectability in the wealthy middle class hides a moral malaise which contributes to the rise of the colonels and enables the culture of 'disappearing' those who are deemed not to fit in or belong, once the coup has taken place. The colour in the title of this atmospheric and suspenseful film hints at the terror to come.

Programming news

The classic film - screening on March 20th and voted for by members - is Agnès Varda's 1962 drama, Cleo, from 5 to 7. Thanks to all who voted.

The committee is still keen to receive members' suggestions for films to include on the long list for next season. Thanks to those who have contributed so far.