



OFFICIAL SELECTION
UN CERTAIN REGARD
FESTIVAL DE CANNES

Rafiki

BY WANURI KAHIU



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Synopsis

“Good Kenyan girls become good Kenyan wives,” but Kena and Ziki long for something more. Despite the political rivalry between their families, the girls resist and remain close friends, supporting each other to pursue their dreams in a conservative society. When love blossoms between them, the two girls will be forced to choose between happiness and safety.

INTERVIEW WITH WANURI KAHIU



What was the starting point for the film ?

I was in my late teens when I first saw a film about young Africans in love. Before that, I had never seen any Africans kiss. I still remember the thrill, surprise and wonder and how the film disrupted my idea of romance. Before then, affection was reserved for foreigners, not us. To imagine that it was normal for Africans to hold hands and kiss on screen was astonishing. Years later, when I read “Jambula Tree” by Monica Arac de Nyeko I was caught off guard again. As a romantic, I had to bring to life the tender playfulness of the girls in “Jambula Tree” and as a filmmaker, it was vital to show beautiful Africans in love and add those memories to cinema.

Rafiki, can you explain the title?

Rafiki means friend in Swahili, and often when Kenyans of the same sex are in a relationship, they forgo the ability to introduce their partners, lovers, mates, husbands or wives as they would like, and instead call them “rafiki”.

How did you find your two actresses as it must have required a great deal of sensitivity and a certain amount of secrecy ?

I met Samantha (Sam) first. She was at a friend’s party and she looked exactly the way I imagined Kena would. I didn’t know anything about her but soon found out she was a drummer. I was very excited when she agreed to come in for an audition, and even more so when she agreed to play the role. I knew what it meant to accept a role like this in Kenya. It meant a commitment to uncomfortable conversations with friends, family and a possible opposition from the government. However, Sam did not waiver, she committed to the project and lovingly brought Kena to life.

Sheila came into the audition full of the joy of living. She was full of charm, curiosity and her portrayal of the character Ziki was the perfect match for the more tempered and responsible Kena. Sheila was initially hesitant to take the role but a close queer friend reminded her of the importance of being seen and acknowledged, so Sheila agreed to the role.

How did you manage to create the right intimate scenes ?

The experience we want to communicate is the incredibly soft yet awkward newness of first love and the willingness to risk everything, and choose it. To do that, we allowed for awkward silences, held gazes, improvised dialogue and fluidity of movement between Kena and Ziki.

When creating the world, we referenced artists like Zanele Muholi, Mickalene Thomas and Wangechi Mutu whose work express femininity, strength and courage. We hoped to reflect these attributes in the film and infused these influences with the immediacy of the vibrant Nairobi neighbourhood we were in. Production designer Arya Laloo used these to create a maximalist, lo-fi, hybrid aesthetic by mixing lots of prints and textures, from traditional Kenyan and other African cloths to mass-produced fabrics, furniture from different periods and styles and employed bold, bright and varied palettes.

The setting is in Nairobi but how did you choose your locations and how important is that for you?

We set the film in a lively, upbeat neighbourhood in Nairobi. Once we knew the neighborhood we wanted to shoot in, we rewrote the script to suit it. The location we choose is a large, tumbling housing estate with churches, schools, shops all within a perimeter wall that opens out to a dam on one side. It is the kind of place where everybody knows everyone else and privacy is a luxury. We also wanted the neighborhood to reflect a cross section of Nairobi people, from boda boda (motorcycle) drivers to competing politicians to gossiping kiosk owners. The neighborhood in its bright, noisy, intrusive way was the perfect antagonist to the quiet, intimate, secret spaces the girls tried to create.

Do you want to bring a message with your film and if so, what is the message ?

Making a film about two young women in love challenges the larger human rights issues associated with same sex relationships in East Africa. Over the past 5 years of developing this film, we have seen worrying developments in the anti-LGBTI climate in East Africa. Local films and international TV shows have been banned because of LGBTI content. This has muffled conversations about LGBTI rights and narrowed the parameters of freedom of speech. My hope is that the film is viewed as an ode to love, whose course is never smooth, and as a message of love and support to the ones among us who are asked to choose between love and safety. May this film shout where voices have been silenced.

The LGBT rights in Africa are extremely limited, gay people face discrimination, persecution and potentially even death but recently they fight for a place in society, do you hope to make a difference with your film ?

While filming, we challenged deep-rooted cynicism about same sex relations among the actors, crew and continue to do so with friends, relatives and larger society. RAFIKI brings to the forefront conversations about love, choice and freedom. Not only freedom to love but also the freedom to create stories. We hope this conversations reminds us that we all have the right to love, and refusal of that right through violence, condemnation or law violates our most fundamental *raison d'être*, the ability for one human being to love another.

Biography Wanuri Kahiu

Born in Nairobi, Wanuri is part of the new generation of African storytellers. Her stories and films have received international acclaim. Her films screened in numerous film festivals around the world. To date, Wanuri has written and directed six films. *Rafiki* is her second feature film.

She is the co-founder of AFROBUBBLEGUM, a media company that supports, creates and commissions fun, fierce and frivolous African art.

In 2008, Wanuri completed her first feature film *From A Whisper* based on the real life events surrounding the twin bombings of US Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998. The film won awards at the Africa Movie Academy Awards including Best Director and Best Picture, the Golden Dhow award at Zanzibar International Film Festival and Best Film at Kalasha, Kenya Film and TV awards. Shortly after she completed a documentary about the life of Nobel peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai entitled *For Our Land* (2009) for M-Net 'Great Africans' Series.

Her short Science Fiction Film *Pumzi* (2009) that was partially funded by Focus Features, Goethe Institut and Changa Moto Fund in Kenya, screened at Sundance in 2010. *Pumzi* won Best Short at Cannes Independent Film Festival, May 2010 and took Silver at Carthage Film Festival in 2010.

Wanuri was named a TED Fellow in 2017 and World Economic Forum cultural leader in 2018. Wanuri published her first children's book, *The Wooden Camel* (Lanata Publishing), she is currently in post production on a feature length documentary "GER" (To Be Separate) and in pre-production on "*Rusties*" a near future science fiction film set in Nairobi.

AWARDS

Citta Di Venezia Award/ Venice International Film Festival/ 2010

PUMZI - South Africa, Kenya, 21 min/ 2010

Best Short Film - ARIFF Film Festival/ Port Harcourt/ Nigeria 2010

Silver Prize/ Best Short - Carthage Film Festival/ Tunisia/ 2010

Best Short - Cannes Independent Film Festival/ France/ 2010

Special Jury Prize – Zanzibar International Film Festival/ 2010

FROM A WHISPER – Kenya, 79 min/ 2008

Best Actor – Tarifa Film Festival/ Spain/ 2010

Best Picture – Pan African Film Festival Los Angeles/ USA/ 2010

Best Feature - ION International Film Festival/ Nigeria/ 2009

Best E. Africa Film – Zanzibar Film Festival/ 2009

Best Picture/ Best Director/ Best Soundtrack/ Best Screenplay/ Best Editing – Africa Movie Academy Awards/ Nigeria/2009

INTERVIEWS/ PRESS

TED Fellows 2017: Fun, fierce and fantastical African art

https://www.ted.com/talks/wanuri_kahiu_fun_fierce_and_fantastical_african_art#t-2995

NPR: She Calls Her Movies 'Afro Bubble Gum Art'

<https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/04/29/526031278/she-calls-her-movies-afro-bubble-gum-art>

PBS: Brief but Spectacular

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/brief/222919/wanuri-kahiu>

Quartz: Science Fiction has ancient roots in Africa

<https://qz.com/743683/without-allowing-space-for-imagination-we-lose-hope/>

TEDX Nairobi

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PvxOLVaV2YY>

BBC World Service: Is Science Fiction Coming to Africa?

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00t4yn2>

BBC World Service: The Strand Weekend

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p006k8nk>

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http://articles.cnn.com/2010-03-26/entertainment/wanuri.kahiu.pumzi_1_female-directors-director-award-film?s=PM:SHOWBIZ

THE AFRICA REPORT

<http://www.theafricareport.com/tag/wanuri-kahiu.html>

LIFE AND TIMES

<http://lifeandtimes.com/a-tree-grows-in-nairobi>

BBC World Service (Africa)

http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/2010/03/100312_pumzistory.shtml



Samantha Mugatsia

Born in Kenya, Samantha Mugatsia is a drummer, visual artist, DJ and a member of the music band **Yellow Light Machine**. She joined the Nairobi eclectic underground scene in 2014 and since then she has been able to perform as a drummer at various prestigious festivals and events in East Africa.

In addition she was the drummer for the House of Reggae band for Virginia Reggae Ambassador and Artist of the Year '15/'16 - Mighty Joshua

Drawn to poetry she has performed as a house band member for different Kenyan hip hop groups at various Prose Writers and Thespians events such as the Spoken Live Thursday's (put together by Pan African Writers Collective: Jalada) and The Kwani?Trust writer's stage.

Samantha also worked on **Afri-Na-Ladi**, a collaborative project with Ghanaian based artist Jojo Abot. She then performed as the opening Act for the **Alsarah and Nubatones** (of Nubian Origin now based in Brooklyn, NY) for their SILT Tour at Alliance Française. Together with her band they created **the Lounge** project and have had numerous collaborations with renowned African artists.

As a visual artist and model, she has collaborated on numerous projects such as the themed project and has co-created a CD Demo Art Design together with Kanyeki Nyeks.

She recently launched her acting career by landing a lead role in RAFIKI, a feature film directed by Wanuri Kahiu.



Sheila Muniya

Sheila Muniya was born on the 27th March 1993 in Nairobi, Kenya. This versatile actor recently starred in the film RAFIKI by award winning film director Wanuri Kahiu. She plays the role of Ziki, a free spirit torn between love and safety.

As rising filmmaker, Sheila has directed adverts in her home country Kenya and is currently working on directing her first short film NGAO a narrative based off her experiences as a child.

In college, she trained as a news anchor before changing her major to Film Production. Soon after, she expanded her script writing skills by attending writers masterclasses which deepened her love for filmmaking.

Sheila strongly believes in the power of giving back and doing good to others. Currently she uses her influence to mentor young girls at a non-profit school in the slums of Kibera.

PRODUCTION

The making of *Rafiki* took 6 years, starting with a script development workshop in 2012. With the support of numerous international funders and the participation of our 6 co-producers led by South African production company Big World Cinema, we began pre-production in December 2016. The film was shot in March-April 2017, over 4 weeks in a Nairobi housing estate, and a few other city locations. With the exception of the 4 foreign HODs, the entire crew was Kenyan and based in Nairobi. This is a women-led film with female director, writers, HODs, crew members, trainees, as well as the film's sound-track artists. The story and its creation is a celebration of young Kenyan women working in the creative economy.

Production Companies

BIG WORLD CINEMA lead by Steven Markovitz, was established in 1994 and has produced and co-produced feature films and documentaries including *High Fantasy* (TIFF, Berlinale 2018), *Silas* (TIFF 2017), *Stories of Our Lives* (TIFF, Berlinale Teddy Jury Award 2015), *Beats of the Antonov* (Winner TIFF Documentary Audience Award 2014), *Viva Riva!* (TIFF, Berlinale 2011) and the shorts *Husk* (In Short Film Competition, Cannes, 1999) and *Inja* (Oscar nominated, 2002). They have an extensive production and distribution network across Africa.

AFROBUBBLEGUM is a media company that supports, creates and commissions fun, fierce and frivolous African art. Made up of storytellers, clothes makers, graphic designers, musicians, lovers of life, joy harbingers, beauty mongers, hope sayers. With links to existing online presence, we celebrate the breadth of curators, collectors and creators already celebrating the joy, love and happiness of Africa through their work.

MPM PREMIUM PRESENTS a BIG WORLD CINEMA AND AFROBUBBLEGUM production
IN CO-PRODUCTION WITH MPM FILM, SCHORTCUT FILMS, APE&BJØRN, RINKEL FILM,
RAZOR FILM IN ASSOCIATION WITH TANGO ENTERTAINMENT.

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CAST

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

CREW

Writer/Director	Wanuri Kahiu
Co-writer	Jenna Bass
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
Executive Producer	Tim Headington
Editor	Isabelle Dedieu
Additional editing	Ronelle Loots
Director of Photography	Christopher Wessels
Production Designer	Arya Lalloo
Sound recordist	Frederic Salles
Casting Director	Nini Wacera

Based on the short story, *Jambula Tree*, by Monica Arac de Nyeko