

FILM REVIEW

Wanuri Kahiu, director. *Rafiki*. 2018. 82 minutes. English and Swahili (with English subtitles). Kenya/South Africa/France/Lebanon/Norway/Netherlands/Germany/USA. Big World Cinema/Afrobubblegum/MPM Films/Schortcut Films/Ape&Björn/Rinkel Film/Razor Film Production GmbH/Tango Productions.

I remember well the day that acclaimed filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu handed me a copy of “Jambula Tree,” a short story by Ugandan author Monica Arac de Nyeko, winner of the 2007 Caine Prize. I remember becoming immersed in this story of coming of age and sexual awakening between two young women in a small Ugandan village. A tale of remembrance, “Jambula Tree” is rich with textures and tensions, with saturated colors and boldly conceived characters. Could this deceptively simple short story provide the inspiration for a feature film? Absolutely. But it would take almost a decade of painstaking work and the vision and courage of a dedicated production team to bring it to life.

The first Kenyan film ever to premiere at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival, *Rafiki* burst onto international screens to great fanfare and controversy. A love story between two young women, now transposed to the bustling streets of Nairobi, *Rafiki* is a flagship film for Kahiu’s “Afrobubblegum” revolution—African art that is allowed to be fun and flirty, confident and complex, without the burden of being issue-driven. The Kenyan censors, however, did not agree, banning the film ahead of its international premiere for its alleged promotion and “normalization” of homosexuality. A few months later, Kahiu would sue the Kenyan government and win, allowing the film to be screened in Kenya to packed houses over seven days in September 2018. With *Rafiki*, Kahiu has revealed the contradictions of Kenya’s present, both on and off screen—brimming with light, love, and energy, but beset by seemingly arbitrary and too often dangerous restraints.

A Romeo and Juliet tale, *Rafiki* tells the story of Kena (Samantha Mugatsia) and Ziki (Sheila Munyiva), two young women from opposing political families whose lives collide in a “meet cute” befitting the genre. Cut through with class, political, and religious tensions, the film charts the magnetic pull between these two women as they encounter a variety of characters across Nairobi’s busy streets: a dedicated boda driver, a gossipy kiosk owner, a dancing girl gang, an energetic priest, and a range of parental figures struggling through their own dramas. In the middle of all of these

forces, Kena and Ziki find themselves falling in love, a love that by societal pressure, familial obligation, and political and religious prohibition seems impossible.

The adapted screenplay, co-written with South African filmmaker Jenna Bass (*Love the One You Love, High Fantasy*), departs from the short story that inspired the film in several ways: the slightly older protagonists, the urban setting, and the more dramatic structure and ending. What the film retains from its source material is the rich textures, the sense of searching and wonder, the array of colorful characters, and the intimacy of its female protagonists and the world they construct for themselves.

The film's greatest strength is certainly the chemistry between its two leads. In their secret garden—an abandoned van overgrown with bright flowers and foliage—Kena and Ziki create a space of exploration and connection that is denied to them in the outside world. While the mounting tension between the two is palpable, the sensuality represented is subtle, implied through playful and partially obscured glimpses, sounds, and expressions.

The specificity of place is central to the film's immediacy and arresting gaze. It is refreshing to see Nairobi as beautiful, vibrant, and cool, filled with complexities and contradictions. Sounds of the city draw the viewer in, even before the glimpses of social life, pulsating soundtrack, and pop art fantasy rhythmically introduce the film's main characters and setting.

Kahiu's "Afrobubblegum" approach may result in a more commercially driven, conventional picture, but its stated non-"issue-driven" mandate has not hindered the film's galvanizing effect, fostering very public debates and discussions around cultural representation, censorship, and citizenship. As Kena says of her pink-and-purple dreadlocked love interest, this film may not be the "typical African" film many have come to expect. But perhaps, as its final image flashes forward to bright, new possible futures, it is the film we want and need.

Julie MacArthur
University of Toronto
Toronto, Canada

julie.macarthur@utoronto.ca

doi:10.1017/asr.2018.137