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I am Not A Witch (12)

Dir: Rungano Nyoni

With: Chileshe Kalimamukwento, Travers Merrill, Maggie Mulubwa

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Synopsis: After a minor incident in her village, nine-year-old Shula is exiled to a travelling witch camp where she is told that if she tries to escape she will be transformed into a white goat. As she navigates through her new life, she must decide whether to accept her fate or risk the consequences of seeking freedom.

Welsh/Zambian filmmaker Rungano Nyoni's debut *I Am Not a Witch* makes inspired use of nonprofessionals actors she found on the streets to craft a striking fairy-tale-cum-satire about witchcraft in rural Zambian society. Taking aim too at government corruption and misogyny, it brings to mind both Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*.

A young, anonymous girl is accused of being a witch by a mob of villagers and is banished to a witch camp. Under the watchful gaze of a predatory government official, she and the elderly ladies there are readily exploited for their labour, their supposed magical powers, but also for their tourist dollar. The film has a bleak sense of humour that is particularly effective in the court scenes where the nine-year-old 'witch' (newcomer Maggie Mulubwa, with a sad, haunted stare) has to identify the guilty party.

Witch camps do actually exist, Nyoni explained in the Q&A afterwards (she spent a month researching one in Ghana). But it's unlikely they resemble the surreal metaphorical dystopias that she boldly conjures, where the witches are shackled by long ribbons mounted on giant reels to ensure they can't escape. The spectacle of their white ribbons against the dusty, muted landscape is one of the film's chilling visual punches. There are some bombastic aural stylistic choices too, with Vivaldi and Estelle rubbing shoulders on the surprising soundtrack. While the satire occasionally feels too blunt,



overall the film offers a rush of originality, energy and ambition so often lacking at Cannes.

Isabel Stevens (2018): BFI

Credits

Shula	Maggie Mulubwa
Mr Banda	Henry B.J. Phiri
Charity	Nancy Murilo
Mama	Margaret Spinella
Police Officer Josephine	Nellie Munamonga
Witch Doctor	James Manaseh
TV presenter	Innocent Kalakula
Woman with bucket	Eunice Mapala
Mwape	Margaret Z. Mwale
Florence	Miriam Nata
Mubango	Selita Zulu
Bwalya	Becky Ngoma
Grandfather	Goodfellow Kayuni
Nelson	John Ng'Ambi
Drunk Man	Leo Chisanga
British farmer	Travers Merrill
Tourist	Gloria ZewelANJI Raen
Teacher	Azzion Nyrenda
Witness	Chileshe Kalimamukwento
Director	Rungano Nyoni
Screenplay	Rugano Nyoni
Cinematography	David Gallego
Editing	George Cragg, Yann Dedet., Thibault Hague
Costume	Holly Rebecca
Music	Matthew James Kelly

UK/Zambia 2017. 93mins

Another View

In a remote Zambian village, a nine-year-old girl (Margaret Mulubwa) is accused of being a witch and given a stark choice: to accept her supernatural branding and live a tethered life as a sorceress, or to cut her ties with local tradition and be transformed into a goat that may be killed and eaten for supper. Thus begins this bewilderingly strange yet terrifically sure-footed feature debut from writer-director Rungano Nyoni. Born in Zambia and part-raised in Wales, Nyoni first made international waves with such award-winning shorts as *Mwansa the Great* (2011) and *Listen* (2014). Now, this daringly satirical parable of magic and misogyny, superstition and social strictures confirms her promise as a film-maker of fiercely independent vision, with a bright future ahead.

Unsurprisingly opting to embrace her supernatural status, the young heroine of *I Am Not a Witch* is sent to the local “witch camp”, an enslaved tourist attraction. Here, the women offer a sense of community and protection to the all-but-silent newcomer, whom they name Shula (“it means ‘to be uprooted’”). But when government official Mr Banda (Henry BJ Phiri) declares that “you are my little witch now”, a strange form of celebrity looms. Soon, Shula is being paraded around local courts and TV stations, dispensing divine justice and hawking magical eggs – all for the profit of her garrulous keeper. “What if she’s actually just a child?” asks the presenter of the *Smooth Talk* chatshow, a question that is met with stony silence from her “state guardian”.

Nyoni was apparently inspired by real-life reports of witchcraft accusations in Zambia, and her research took her to Ghana, where she became the first foreigner to sleep in one of the world’s oldest “witch camps”. Here, she observed first hand the daily rituals of these women whose fates have been sealed by “nothing more than hearsay”. Yet for all its factual grounding, *I Am Not a Witch* is also a work of fairytale invention, unravelling the threads of its quasi-mythical narrative with anarchic aplomb. In particular, the motif of women restrained from flight by vast lengths of white ribbon has a touch of Charles Perrault or the brothers Grimm – a magical-realist conceit that brilliantly dramatises the down-to-earth reality of the ties that bind.

There’s a hint of the absurdist tragicomedy of Yorgos Lanthimos’s *The Lobster* too, as Shula faces a Kafkaesque choice between enforced conformity and metamorphosis. Brilliantly, Nyoni keeps her audience wondering whether they’re meant (or allowed?) to laugh or cry at this insane predicament, juxtaposing scenes of poignant despair with sociopolitical existential slapstick. Early accusations of witchcraft have an almost Pythonesque quality, while a sequence in which a show trial is interrupted by a mobile phone is pure farce. Fans of Chilean surrealist [Alejandro Jodorowsky](#) will warm to a streak of deadpan humour that is drier than the arid plains upon which Shula dances to summon the rain.

Having worked monochrome miracles on [Ciro Guerra’s](#) Amazon odyssey *Embrace of the Serpent*, cinematographer David Gallego here conjures a kaleidoscope of arresting tableaux: lonely Shula listening through a blue horn to the distant laughter of schoolchildren carried on the wind; a huge orange truck with women tied to outstretched reels, like some mobile fairground ride; the open mouth of a giant head looming towards us, while a frightened child huddles within. These images are hauntingly composed and dreamily sustained, the length of the shots heightening comedy and tragedy alike, with heartbreaking results. Meanwhile, music cues swerve from Vivaldi to Estelle, keeping the audience on edge and uneasy.

At the centre of it all is a group of nonprofessional players, led by young Margaret Mulubwa, who was discovered during a location recce in Luapula Province. And what a discovery she is! With a face that can transform from innocence to defiance in an instant, Mulubwa is a mesmerising screen presence, her stoical countenance broken occasionally by a radiant smile that lights up the landscape. As for Nyoni, her ability to blend cruel humour, pointed satire and empathetic anger to produce something touched by tragic

transcendence is astonishing. In interviews, she has described watching Michael Haneke movies as “my film school” (perhaps those white ribbons are a homage?). Yet she has also talked enthusiastically about her love of the witchy 1996 teen fantasy *The Craft*. With such wide-ranging influences, who knows what this remarkable film-maker will do next? Having been spellbound by her audacious first feature, I can’t wait to find out.

Mark Kermode (2017): The Guardian

Our next screening

**Friday May 24th, Terry O’Toole Theatre, 7.30pm
Girlhood (France 2014. Cert 15)**

Growing up in a poor Paris suburb, 16-year-old Marieme attempts to find her place in the world – preferably a better place that seems to be typically on offer to a black girl of her background. Her schooling does not appear to hold out any great prospects and her family life is suffocating, particularly under the manipulative control of her abusive elder brother. She gravitates towards a local girl gang, skipping classes when she feels like it, hoping for something more positive. The friendship of the girls and the special bond between them seem to pave the way to a life of greater freedom and self-confidence for Marieme. However, it is no easy task for her to escape the constrictive environment and the stereotypical roles that always seem to be imposed on her. For that Marieme needs to draw deeply on her own inner strength. Brimming with energy and exuberance, “Girlhood” packs a punch!