



Film

# African Magic

*The Burial of Kojó*  
*The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*

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THE dominance of Hollywood – the greatest corrupter of western culture in history – means that most cinemagoers struggle to gain access to films produced outside America and Britain (the desire to ‘take back control’ from the EU by Brexiteers is ironic given the almost total subservience of Britain to American culture). We should therefore be grateful to the streaming sites for offering films that would make it into only a handful of cinemas, if at all. Netflix is leading the way in bringing us quality movies from outside the US/UK axis: witness the Mexican masterpiece *Roma* reviewed here in the last issue.



African films are almost non-existent in British cinemas, but two just released on Netflix are well worth watching. *The Burial of Kojó* is the first feature of Samuel ‘Blitz’ Bazawule, who was born and raised in Ghana and is now based in New York. Bazawule, already known as a hip-hop artist, also composed the score, which is an atmospheric mix of Afrobeat, jazz and pop.

Films about Africa often focus on the poverty, squalor and struggles of the people. That is present here, as well as allusions to local corruption and foreign imperialism, but they are only a backdrop to the personal story of a young girl Esi (marvellously acted by Cynthia Dankwa) who lives with her mother Ama (Mamley Djangmah) and father Kojó (Joseph Otsiman) in a Ghanaian village built on wooden stilts in the middle of a lake. The mother supplies most of the family’s meagre income through sewing, while Kojó takes Esi out in his boat and spins her tales whose beginnings only make sense if you know how they end.

Esi’s world is very much one of dreams and visions. One day a blind old shaman paddles up to the village from the ‘realm in-between’ and asks Esi to look after a white ‘sacred bird’ which, he says, is being hunted by an evil crow. At night she has a premonitory dream of a menacing man in a crow costume.

Eli is trying to grasp the meaning of this vision when Kojó’s estranged brother Kwabena turns up and persuades Kojó to bring his family back to the city he had left seven years before. The brothers had once loved the same woman, who died on the day of her wedding to Kwabena in an accident caused by Kojó’s drunk driving. But Kwabena insists that the past is the past and that they can get rich by robbing an abandoned gold mine.

You can guess who the white bird and the crow are, but I shall not divulge what happens. Suffice to say that the film is a touching story of human courage and survival and a surrealistic feast of beautiful images and sounds in which dream and reality merge into a super-reality.

*The Burial of Kojó* is a haunting tragedy, while *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* is an inspirational triumph. It tells the true story of William Kamkwamba, a young Malawian engineer and author who gained fame in his country in the early 2000s when he built a wind turbine in his family home, using bicycle parts, blue gum trees and other materials collected in a nearby scrapyard.

The film, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival earlier this year, is the directorial debut of Chiwetel Ejiofor, star of *Twelve Years a Slave*, who also wrote the screenplay and plays the boy’s father Trywell, a hard-working subsistence farmer in a small village in Malawi. He is a good father but initially sceptical of his son’s fancy ideas. The film succeeds in conveying both the tension and love that define the father-son relationship.

It opens in 2001 when the 13-year-old boy, brilliantly played by Maxwell Simba, is sent to a nearby private school. But the rains fail and famine strikes. Trywell is faced with not only possible starvation but also greedy landowners ready to sell out to international tobacco companies and a government that couldn’t care less for the local farmers’ plight.

William is forced to leave school because his father can’t pay the fees, but he sneaks back into the school library, where he finds a book, *Using Energy*, that gives him the inspiration to generate electricity. He constructs a wind turbine which powers a water pump, allowing his father to plant seeds out of season.

The title of the film is a bit of a spoiler. But that doesn’t matter because Ejiofor spends much of the running time depicting the community and creating a real feeling for the place, bringing to life the country’s landscape and culture. The film also skilfully throws light on the process of scientific invention and proves the old adage: give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime. □

