

Rafiki (2018)

Claudia Böhme

dir. Wanuri Kahiu; prod. Steven Markovitz; screenplay Wanuri Kahiu, Jenna Bass; photography Christopher Wessels; music Frederic Salles. DCP, color, 83 mins. Big World Cinema, distrib. Edition Salzgeber et al.

The Kenyan film *Rafiki* by Wanuri Kahiu is a postmodern melodrama about two young women in love. »Rafiki« means friend in Swahili, and homosexual lovers cover their love with this neutral term. With its narrative about two young women finishing high school, *Rafiki* is a coming-of-age drama as well as part of an international feminist and queer cinema (Kinofenster.de; Ojiambo). As Lyn Johnstone argues, *Rafiki* can be interpreted as part of a queer worldmaking that offers Kenyan LGBTIQ+ the affirmation that a world does exist beyond the hegemonic heteronormative status quo. Queer sexualities are forbidden by law in Kenya and LGBTIQ+ activists have fought in vain to change this (Ncube 61). The film was banned for »legitimiz[ing] homosexuality against the dominant values, cultures and beliefs of the people of Kenya« (Cooper). But according to the decision of the Kenyan Film Classification Board (KFBC), the reason was not the visualisation of same-sex intimacy but rather the end of the film, as it was »too hopeful« for queer people in Kenya (Cooper). Kahiu sued the government and won, and when the ban was lifted for one week to allow for a consideration at the Oscars, *Rafiki* enjoyed a major run in Kenyan cinemas, was screened at several international queer film festivals, and was nominated in Cannes for the Queer Palm category (MacArthur; Ncube). Moreover, as a popular social text, viewers vividly discussed the film on social media, a space where alternative standpoints can be articulated and same-sex relations discussed (Ncube).

Rafiki is an exceptional film both for its story and production design. It is a lesbian love story located in Nairobi and expresses the love and the struggles the two women go through as well as the harsh violence they endure in their neighborhood. Remarkable is *Rafiki*'s stunning visual narrative with its play of colors and costumes. The film's visual style supports the film's topic. As Kahiu states, while creating the common world of Kena (played by Samantha Mugatsia) and Ziki (played by Sheila Munyiva), Kahiu and her co-producers were thinking about artists like the South African photo artist and LGBTIQ+ activist Zanele Muholi, the African American visual artist Mickalene Thomas,



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and the Nairobi based Kenyan artist Wangechi Mutu (in *Rafiki* Presseheft). The production designer of *Rafiki* is Arya Laloo, who has used these references in the creation of what Kahiü calls an »excessive hybrid aesthetic,« combining different patterns and structures from traditional Kenyan and African cloth and mass fabrications, furniture from different epochs and styles, as well as the application of »daring« shining and diverse color palettes (in *Rafiki* Presseheft).

Wanuri Kahiü is one of the young female Kenyan writers and filmmakers who has become internationally known as part of a new Kenyan cinema (Dovey; Okioma and Mugubi; Steedman). She was born in Nairobi in 1980, studied management in London, and took film courses in Los Angeles, where she also took part in the production of *The Italian Job* (2003). She came back to Kenya to make films with an Afrofuturistic perspective (*Rafiki* Presseheft). Her other films are *From A Whisper* (2008), *For Our Land* (2009), → *Pumzi* (2009), and *The Thing about Jellyfish* (2021) (Diang'a; »Regisseur/in Wanuri Kahiü«; Rico; Giruzzi). Kahiü is co-founder of the media network AfroBubbleGum, which produces African art with aesthetics that are fun, fierce, and frivolous, opposing the image of Africa as a poor, war- and HIV/Aids-beaten continent (*Rafiki* Presseheft; Kahiü; Kinofenster.de). *Rafiki* displays this aesthetic especially at the beginning of the film which stands in sharp contrast to the dramatic and violent scenes of the melodrama, marked by the lovers' struggle with themselves and their outside world. The film was foreign-funded and has a clear gender-based moral message, which is typical of so-called donor films in the region.

Rafiki is based on the short story »Jambula Tree« by the Ugandan writer Monica Arac de Nyeko about the two adolescent girls Anyango and Sangu who fall in love. The piece is written in the form of a letter by Sango to Anyango, not knowing whether it reaches the lover. When their relationship is discovered, Anyango is sent to a boarding school abroad and Sangu becomes a nurse and lives alone. An old Jambula tree with purple fruits, which are unreachable as well as color the girls' tongues and the ground all purple, is a metaphor for their love (Arac de Nyeko; Barlet; Moshenberg). As Kahiü states, as she has never seen Africans in a romantic relationship or even kissing until she reached her late teens, she was so inspired by the short story that she had to bring the two women to life with her film (in *Rafiki* Presseheft).

Like in a music video, the camera follows Kena on her skateboard through the scenery of the Nairobi neighborhood Slopes to the sound of the rhythmic song »Suzi Noma« by Muthoni Drummer Queen. She picks up her close friend Blacksta (played by Neville Misati), a stylish young man always on his motorbike, followed by the jealous eyes of Nduta (played by Nice Githinji). Kena is presented as a cool type of girl, who rides a skateboard, plays football, and hangs out with her male friends at a small kiosk and café, the realm of Mama Atim (played by Muthoni Gathecha), the evil gossiper. The topic of homosexuality is hinted at for the first time when a young queer man passes through the scene.

The genre of ethnic and post-election violence in Kenya is referenced in the side story as Kena is Kikuyu and Zena is Luo and both are daughters of rivalling politicians. Kena's father (played by John Mwaura) is a politician who works in a small kiosk, asking for the votes of his neighbors. He has left Kena's mother for a younger woman who is expecting his baby. Ziki's father (played by Dennis Musyoka) is the wealthier rival politician. When Kena spots Ziki for the first time, dancing with her two girlfriends, she freezes. Her appearance has something of an Afrofuturistic queen or goddess or

a free rebel girl. The two girls have their first date at the café and later go on a rooftop where they can talk about their future. Kena wants to become a nurse while Ziki wants to travel and see the world and not be doing »Kenyan stuff,« leading a domestic life with housework and childcare. The two women make a pact while crossing their fingers that they will never be like any of them down there; instead, after some thoughts, they want to be »something real.«

When they play football together, it starts to rain heavily, and the two women take shelter in an old white VW minibus as a safe space. Purple bougainvillea flowers cover the bus, which fuse with Ziki's pink lipstick. Purple is also the color of love in *Jambula Tree* (Arac de Nyeko 18). Although Kena flees this first sexual encounter, the two women from now on spend their leisure time together. They do a tour with an artfully decorated Tuk Tuk, ride in a rollercoaster, ride a pedalo, hold hands, and lean on each other to the sound of Mumbi Kasumba's romantic song »Ignited.«

The first violent attack comes from Ziki's girlfriend pushing and cursing Kena, culminating in a fight between the two women. Afterwards, Kena confesses her love while Ziki is kissing her wounded lip. When her mother threatens to call Kena's mother, the two girls flee to their retreat and dream of their future together. Mama Atim and Nduta destroy their intimate togetherness and call a violent mob of young men who drag and beat the two women. At the police station, the two officers only mock Kena and Ziki and laugh at them while the girls wait for their parents to collect them. In what follows, Kena has to undergo an exorcism under the homophobic priest in their church and Ziki's parents are determined to send her to London. When Kena goes to visit Ziki for a last time, she sends her away but is crying bitterly afterwards in her mother's arms. In the next scene, apparently years later, we see Kena working as a doctor trainee in a hospital. Mama Atim is one of the patients but rejects being touched by her while telling her that Ziki has come back. Kena goes to her locker, where she keeps a postcard with Ziki's »I miss you« from London. She goes home, walks to the hill, looks around, and suddenly Ziki's soft voice calls her name, Kena smiles happily and relieved. It is Ziki's hand with her neon fingernails touching Kena's shoulder. The film ends and leaves it to the audience to imagine the future of the two lovers.

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