

KEEPING IT REEL

With films like *Viva Riva!* garnering critical acclaim and sparking a major shift in the African film industry, is the world finally ready for African cinema to tell its own stories?

WORDS *Belinda Otas*

“In Kinshasa, every day is a struggle and every night is a party. In a city where everything is for sale, *Riva* has something everyone wants.” Djo Tunda wa Munga’s debut feature film, *Viva Riva!* has cinema buffs the world over in awe. Set in Kinshasa, DRC, the film depicts the country’s tumultuous existence as it chronicles the life of *Riva*, an ambitious mobster in the making, who returns home after spending a decade in Angola, only to find the country in dire straits as a result of fuel shortages. What unravels is an enthralling story of frank realism that includes crime, violence, disorder, corruption and sexuality, revealing the myriad complexities of Kinshasa and its citizens. Munga, who was born in Kinshasa but left to study in Belgium at a young age before returning home, wrote, directed and produced *Viva Riva!* The film, he says, was important to write. “I wanted to talk about Kinshasa. In a global sense, it was important to describe the city in a way that has never been done before. I wanted to explore the last 13 years, the war and change – the new Congo.”

The award-winning film scooped six awards at the African Movie Academy Awards (AMAA), Africa’s equivalent of the Oscars and was named Best African Movie at the MTV Movie Awards after an official premier at the 2011 Durban International Film Festival. It has been screened at some of the world’s most prestigious film festivals, from Berlin to Toronto, including the Pan African Film Festival, Los Angeles. *Viva Riva!* the first feature film to be produced in the last two decades since the DRC’s protracted war began is playing a significant role in reshaping some of the narratives the world has come to understand about the country and the continent as a whole. Despite Munga’s anxiety when the film was

screened in the DRC, the response was positive. “It was like having something in which you recognise yourself. People took ownership of it and young people were saying how proud they were,” says Munga. “This was the first time many people had seen an arthouse film of an international standard, directed by an African director in which people look like them.”

Munga, who comes from a documentary film background, admits it was challenging to marry an arthouse approach with a film that has mass appeal. “We have a high level of illiteracy in the country and making a film, you want to focus on the issues, appeal to international fans and at the same time remain accessible. It was important for it to be close to a documentary. So, it’s a thriller but in a documentary context.”

Munga is not alone in his quest to tell the stories of Africa, and bring to the fore, narratives that are overshadowed by the one-dimensional news media that in turn helps to fuel negative stereotypes associated with the continent. Leila Djansi is an award-winning filmmaker from Ghana, whose film credits include, *I Sing of A Well*, given an award by the British Academy of Film And Television Arts (BAFTA) and *Sinking Sands*, due to be released in Nigeria, the US and Canada later this year. She recently wrapped up shooting *Ties That Bind*, a film which explores the pain of losing a child. Djansi describes herself as a filmmaker who wants to “explore and deal with deep seated emotional and social issues.” *Sinking Sands* explores domestic violence, while *I Sing of A Well*, said to be an ‘intriguing piece of cinema’ exposes the painful subject of slavery from an African perspective.

Africa has always had film industries:



Viva African Cinema!
Congolese thriller *Viva Riva!* is one of a spate of new African films making the world sit up and watch



Francophone, which has its roots in French cinema and Anglophone. In recent years, Nollywood, originating from Nigeria, has captured the imagination of many. Its proliferation and dominance has gone beyond the shores of Nigeria and has been credited for breaking the stranglehold of Hollywood and Bollywood. With the exception of South Africa, which has a long standing film industry, other national film markets have developed on the continent. From Lollywood in Liberia, to Riverwood in Kenya to Gollywood in Ghana, they are all creating

national narratives specific to their citizens but relatable across the board. “

However, Judy Kibinge, a filmmaker from Kenya who describes the current state of Riverwood as exciting with different kinds of filmmakers making different films says, “It’s difficult to talk in general terms about African Cinema because conditions are different from country to country. What’s happening in Nigeria isn’t what’s happening in South Africa, and to try and summarise it like that is to simplify a complex market.”

She adds: “The old francophone begging bowl (financial) model is unsustainable even though the films that come from that region are artistic, I think that filmmakers are beginning to really think about the stories they want to tell and how they are going to finance their creations. I’d therefore be reluctant to generalise but would describe this stage in Africa’s film history as a period of true awakening.”

The world is noticing a change in the visual landscape of the continent. Kibinge explains that the international film market has always been interested in new narratives, be they from Africa, Asia or India. “I don’t think Africa is a special case. It’s the African filmmakers, who have to start producing these new ideas consistently. We can’t build an industry solely by satisfying an international itch. I feel that *Viva Riva!* is a great film in that it has made the West sit up and will probably allow greater ease in accessing funding.”

Nasheen Moodley, manager of The Durban International Film Festival says “There does seem to be revived interest in African cinema and over the last two years we have seen African films make waves at international festivals and importantly, being sold to several territories. While there’s certainly more room for the sale of African cinema, the signs are positive,” he adds.

Djansi says of the one-dimensional African narrative, “I find it troublesome, movies or images that show a hopeless Africa. But I understand where



Modern Drama Ghanaian film 'Ties That Bind' tackles emotional and social issues for women in modern-day Ghana



scene from *Via Riva!* We can see an Angolan tell a Congolese, the DRC is the “worst cow pie I have ever seen. Maybe you should have remained colonised.” Munga says it is a subject “we don’t talk about. We don’t talk about ourselves but to be honest, it’s important to raise these issues. The attitude and hierarchy is questioning what it means to be African. There is a bigoted attitude that we see elsewhere but it is worse because we are Africans and I think this is part of underdevelopment – the prejudice we have among ourselves, the lack of empathy and it’s also a question about society.”

it’s coming from. America, which is sometimes your biggest buyer, is not going to want to buy an Africa that’s vibrant and positive. Hollywood loves stereotypes: the tried and trusted formula. So bringing an African story that portrays normal people living the kind of lives that can be lived anywhere and experiencing the same kind of emotions are not always accepted. I am giving my Africa the identity I think is positive, realistic, truthful and of course beautiful.”



Being able to bring the authenticity of their countries and Africa to the screen is vital. Munga says, “I wanted to emphasise how people manage to cope with everything. The film also has humour and you can see that people have desires and go about their lives on a day-to-day basis and deal.” Ironically, he does not shy away from telling the untold stories Africans may not want in the open and that is in the form of the prejudice we have towards each other. In a

school meant he had to train people. “We have talented people talent but that talent is not enough. We needed to teach people how to use that talent for the camera, the technicians and actors, and it became an organic work across the film.” He adds that funding for his film came from Europe. In spite of the financial hurdles, it has not stopped Munga, Djansi, Kibinge or Bekelo from telling the stories they want to tell in the way they want to tell it. Nollywood has been successful with its business model and has a market because for the first time, Africans had their own imagery reflected back to them. As more filmmakers come to the fore it is a safe bet to say that African cinema is growing beyond Nollywood with a diversity that can compete on an international stage.

