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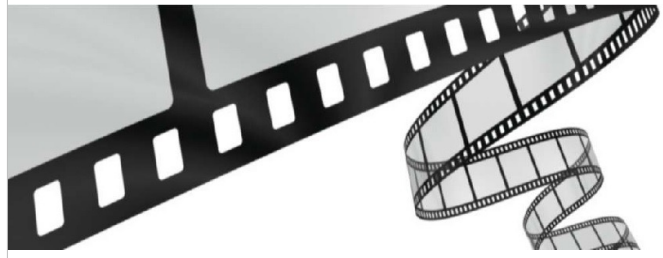
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I AM NOT A WITCH (Tuesday 9 April)

Dir: Rungano Nyoni (2017) 93 mins

"In 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 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."

So, not surprisingly, the young heroine opts for 'life', being sent to the local 'witch camp' to become an enslaved tourist attraction. The women support the all but mute 'Shula', or 'Uprooted' as her new name means, but then she is taken under the wing of government official Mr Banda (Henry BJ Phiri) who declares that "you are my little witch now". Shula is paraded around the local courts and TV stations, dispensing divine justice and hawking magical eggs , for the profit of Mr Banda. When the presenter of the *Smooth Talk* chat-show asks "what if she's actually just a child?", the question 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 observer 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. Nyoni keeps her audience wondering whether they'e 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.

Cinematographer David Gallego (Ciro Guerra's monochrome Amazon odyssey *Embrace of the Serpent*) creates a kaleidoscope of arresting tableaux: startling and beautiful images that will linger in the audience's memory. The music cues serve from Vivaldi to Estelle, keeping the audience on edge and uneasy. The group of non-professional players, led by young Margaret Mulubwa, discovered during a location recce in Luapula Province, is remarkable. Nyoni has described watching Haneke's films as her "film school": could those white ribbons be a homage?

[Much of these notes is taken from Mark Kermode's review of IANAW in *the Observer*]

Our next screening: UNDER THE TREE, Tuesday 23 April.

Don't forget to send in your FILM CHOICES for a 2019-20 season. See the Club's website, Malcolm's attachment to members and/or hard copies available in the foyer of Cramphorn after this film. Choices must **now** be in by Friday 12 April at the latest to be considered!