

# FILM REVIEW

**Chiwetel Ejiofor, director. *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*. 2019. 113 min. English/Chichewa. United Kingdom/Malawi. Participant Media, BBC Films, British Film Institute, and Potboiler Productions. No price reported.**

*The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*, Chiwetel Ejiofor's feature directorial debut, is concerned in large part with traversing the harsh socio-economic landscape of Wimbe, a small agrarian village in Malawi. The film is based on a true story by William Kamkwamba and Bryan Mealer. Ejiofor invites his audience into the world of William Kamkwamba, a 13-year-old boy who lives in Wimbe and comes from a family of farmers. The young William enjoys trying his hands on repairing faulty radios for family, friends, and neighbors; he loves to visit the junkyard to look for useful electronic gadgets and parts. William is seen being expelled from school because his parents cannot afford to pay his fees. However, summoning his never-say-die spirit, he sneaks into the school premises and finds his way to Mr. Mike Kachigunda, his science teacher, who is involved in a secret love affair with William's elder sister Annie. William tries to convince Kachigunda to allow him to continue attending the science class so that he will have access to the school library. Mr. Kachigunda agrees, and so it is in the library that William comes across the book *Using Energy*, which provides instructions about how to construct a windmill.

The windmill that William makes, and which becomes the people's saving grace in the face of a terrible drought and famine, is fashioned from the debris of everyday life, including Mr. Kachigunda's bicycle dynamo and other bits and pieces from William's family bicycle. The final, perhaps most significant, element that completes William's rudimentary invention is the wind, a resource that is naturally available in the community. Additionally, not only does Mr. Kachigunda give up his bicycle dynamo, but Trywell (William's father, the lead role played by Chiwetel himself) also sacrifices the family bicycle, allowing it to be dismantled and used for the construction of the windmill. William is able, using these donated parts and his own ingenuity, to harness the wind for the good of the Wimbe people. These efforts remind us of the personal and collective sacrifices that need to be made in order for meaningful developments to be achieved.

Ejiofor explores a number of important themes: the struggle to provide for one's family in a place blighted by want and hunger; love and romance in a time of adversity; inter-generational conflicts; persecution of those who speak against government actions and policies; and the issue of climate change and the devastating implication of such actions as felling trees. However, the overarching message presented by this film is the idea that Africa's development lies in mobilizing the skills and creativity of its people as well as in using locally available natural resources. Of course, education is vital to achieving this goal, and it is significant that even the very idea about how to channel the wind as a source of energy comes from a book, rather than being simply something which the young William imagines or plucks out of the air.

The film also makes the salient point that development should be people-driven, based on the will and ideas of the people. This is particularly true in Africa, where governments often abdicate their basic responsibilities to the people, and the people are compelled to fend for themselves. Thus, we see in this artistic representation a people determined to overcome their adversities. While some of these hardships are tied to issues of global warming and climate justice, others are linked to Africa's perennial problems of corruption, self-interest, and greed—problems that have crippled much of the effort to bring the continent up to par with other developed societies.

Aesthetically speaking, the feature film is a delightful cinematic experience, with well-tailored and creative dialogues. The film's power lies in its deft focusing of the tension between father and son and between mother and daughter. Agnes' statements and encouragements to Annie highlight the ongoing struggle for women's emancipation and a revolt against erroneous and antiquated cultural assertions and practices that relegate women to the kitchen.

*The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind* is well-paced but lacks suspense. Like a well-written ethnographic piece, we see the complexities, the simplicity, and the struggles relived before us through the cinematographic lens, and we cannot but continue to explore the dramatic twists and turns within the reality of the African socio-economic, political, and cultural milieu. The use of Chichewa language in the film, coupled with the presentation of "real" characters in recognizable village settings, gives the story a distinct scenic texture and a palpable authenticity. The soundtrack, which is indigenous, accompanies and enhances the flow of the mood and sequence of events. The alluring rusticity of the setting and the native culture are given further vitality by the masquerade performances—Gule Wamkulu, symbolizing the ancestral approval and disapproval of the dead and transition ("Do you think the Gule Wamkulu will come when my father dies?" asks Gilbert, Chief Wimbe's son) and the occasional humor drawn from home-grown imagination.

Finally, with outstanding camerawork and powerful storytelling, the film does not overemphasize Africa's victimhood in the experience of democracy. Clearly, there seems to be a great disconnect between meeting the needs of the people and satisfying the aspirations of those who rule. Democracy is

presented as a system of government that seems to be quite expensive to run and favors only the ruling cabal and their interests. Little wonder, Trywell says, “democracy is just like imported cassava; it rots quickly.” This brings us back to the view that the solution to Africa’s problems cannot be found outside the continent; rather, it must be sourced locally, just like the windmill that is manufactured from local detritus. Domestication or localization of democracy in most African nations is urgently required if this borrowed system of government is to ever make any meaningful and sustainable impact on the continent. The junkyard in which William forages for discarded parts to invent something new is a powerful metaphor for contemporary Africa: an exploited continent, a dumpsite for Western goods and ideas, and a site of the relics of destruction from which solutions and new hopes for survival may be searched and discovered. This regenerative potential of the dumpsite is what we see later in the film, when a life-sustaining windmill is fashioned from reclaimed scraps of electronic gadgets and donated spare parts.

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