



World premiere - Toronto International Film Festival 2021
African premiere – FESPACO 2021

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A coming-of-age political love story set in the final years of British colonial Zanzibar. Denge, a young freedom fighter meets Yasmin, an Indian-Zanzibari woman in the middle of the night as she is on her way to be married. Passion and revolution escalate.



TIFF Programmer's Note: Nataleah Hunter-Young

A young revolutionary and a runaway bride struggle for forbidden freedoms, in Amil Shivji's adaptation of Adam Shafi's Swahili novel.

In this adaptation of Adam Shafi's award-winning Swahili novel, set in 1950s Zanzibar, a romance is buffeted by the harsh waves of British rule and the local militant struggle for liberation.

On the shores of the centuries-old trade port in the Indian Ocean's "Spice Islands" — under British protectorate control and overseen by the Sultan of Oman — Denge, a young Mswahili revolutionary, fights for a free Zanzibar. Slipping past unrelenting colonial police through the tight alleys and crumbling walls of a segregated Stone Town, "De" (Gudrun Columbus Mwanyika) and his comrades import socialist pamphlets and distribute Swahili translations across the island, staging revolts in dance halls and expat clubs to demand political autonomy. De dreams of nothing else until he meets Yasmin (Ikhlas Gafur Vora), a young Indian-Zanzibari woman seeking her own forbidden freedoms who does not expect to be intrigued by De's mystery. After running away from her arranged marriage, Yasmin is reacquainted with her home through De's eyes and through her generous friend, Mwajuma (played by Zanzibari musician Siti Amina). Together, the three venture across communities that are separated by arbitrary British racial categories but deeply blended at the level of culture and rhythm.

Reminiscent of an anti-colonial *In the Mood for Love*, distinguished as one of the few films ever shot on the island of Zanzibar, and the first Tanzanian feature film to ever play at the Festival, Amil Shivji's latest captures the unique historic tensions of an indelibly important time and space. Taking place less than a generation after the close of the East African slave trade, of which Zanzibar was a central hub, this period piece looks ahead to the end of half a century of colonial rule over the archipelago. Shafi's renowned novel itself is taught in high schools across Tanzania, and now a new generation of lovers have *Tug of War* to inspire their dreams for better futures.

Credits

Directed by Amil Shivji
Written by Amil Shivji and Jenna Bass
Based on the novel by Shafi Adam Shafi
Produced by Steven Markovitz & Amil Shivji
Executive produced by Lucinda Englehart, Neil Tabatznik
Co-produced by Tamsin Ranger, Nicole Gerhards
Cinematography by Zenn Van Zyl
Edited by Nadia Ben Rachid, Matthew Swanepoel
Production Design by Emilia Roux, Eliudi Dominic Mwanyika
Costume Design by Hawa Ally Issa
Music by Amine Bouhafa, Amélie Legrand

Denge - Gudrun Columbus Mwanyika
Yasmin - Ikhlas Gafur Vora
Mwajuma - Siti Amina

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Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung
Berlinale World Cinema Fund
Doha Film Institute
Visions Sud Est

Tech specs

Running time: 92 minutes
24fps, colour, 5.1
Swahili and English, with English subtitles
Tanzania / South Africa / Germany / Qatar



Director's Note

"Moreover, I believe that Africans, in particular, must reinvent cinema." Djibril Diop Mambéty

There has never been a Tanzanian period film let alone one made in Zanzibar – this would be the first. Images of white beaches and 'sultan's' palaces flood our screens promoting the serene touristic destination imposing the identity of 'an other' on the Zanzibari people. Tourism continues to gobble up the people and suffocate local culture. *Our images must resist. Our images must love.* Love is at stake if we do not resist and as Che said, "a true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love." My film reminds us of the power of love in a political resistance. To tell a story from one angle is impossible, thus my choice to have a range of characters in *Vuta N'Kuvute* that represent the true social structure of Zanzibar.

No culture, including that of Tanzania's is homogenous. All cultures do have internal struggles, sites of conflict and agents of change. *Culture is a site of liberation*, but is now being referenced as an event to be set in stone and untouched. In *Vuta N'Kuvute* we witness *forbidden love* act as a social resistance to authoritarianism that is manifested in the paternalistic colonial state. Zanzibaris living on the fringes of society are born into a culture of struggle however, there hasn't been any representation of these contradictions in Tanzanian mainstream cinema, and this is what I would like to achieve through this film.

The current political and artistic climate in Tanzania is ambiguous and uncertain. There is a general atmosphere of fear and silence. The political administration recently admitted that 'art is the biggest threat to the regime'. Globally, narrow nationalism is at the forefront of political ideology, whether in Europe, Africa or North America. In Tanzania we are experiencing the same level of parochial attitude from our government leaders which, even if unintentionally, undermines the union between Mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar. Each nation-state seeks to declare its autonomy at the risk of further divisions within society. With decreasing spaces for dialogue and lack of local cultural institutions, films are now being made to serve the status quo rather than to question it.

Zanzibar has always been a contentious issue in regards to the desire for autonomy from the mainland. Recently, the desire for autonomy has been exacerbated as political visions look towards the western state-centric model of political organization, jeopardizing the once united struggle against colonialism. Zanzibar has always wanted to live yet its UNESCO 'World Heritage Site' recognition is forcing its culture to remain static. Nonetheless, in the old architecture that Zanzibar seeks to preserve is embedded a culture of struggle, from the dockworkers strikes of the '40s through the bloody revolution of 1964 to the constant battle for greater autonomy from the Mainland. This historical drama aids in emphasizing and reminding us of both, solidarity and tension across the Indian Ocean that challenges the racial, gender and class barriers generated by the colonial and post-colonial state. Love is political in *Vuta N'Kuvute* and I'm interested in showing how it liberates itself from the constraints of colonialism.

My work has represented Tanzania internationally on many occasions and I have made films across the country establishing my production house as a force to reckon with in the region. In all of my previous five films, presentations and university lectures, I have focused on stories of the working people to expose social contradictions within society. I have been working alongside local historians in the research phase of the film visiting archives and museums on the mainland and Zanzibar to provide historical context and accuracy and do justice to the ideological calling and paraphernalia of the time. This film will fit within those boundaries and aids in placing Tanzanian history in context.

Selected Biographies

Writer/Director/Producer



Amil Shivji was born in Tanzania and is a filmmaker and lecturer at the University of Dar es Salaam. He believes in using images to challenge the powers that be, in particular deconstructing urban facades of development and emphasizing the strength and struggles of marginalized communities. Amil has written, directed and produced short films that have participated in Rotterdam and FESPACO, winning People's Choice Award in Zanzibar and Best Director in Africa. His feature directorial debut T-Junction (2017) opened Zanzibar International Film Festival, winning three awards. He has a Masters in Fine Arts from York University in Toronto.

Producer



Steven Markovitz has 25 years' experience producing feature films, documentaries, short films, distribution and festivals. He has worked with over 100 directors in 25 African countries. Steven co-founded the production company Big World Cinema in 1994. He produced Wanuri Kahiu's Rafiki (Cannes - Un Certain Regard, TIFF) and hajooj kuka's aKasha (Venice Critics' Week, TIFF). In 2017 he produced Jenna Bass' body-swap comedy High Fantasy (TIFF, Berlinale), Winnie by Pascale Lamche (winner of Sundance Directing Award) and Silas (TIFF, IDFA). He also executive-produced the award-winning LGBTI Kenyan feature film, Stories of Our Lives (TIFF 2014, Berlinale Panorama 2015), directed by Jim Chuchu, which won Berlinale's Teddy Special Jury Award. He is the co-founder of Encounters South African International Documentary Festival, he founded the immersive media non-profit, Electric South and the pan-African documentary fund DocA. He is a voting member of the Academy of Motion Pictures, Arts and Sciences.

Co-writer

Jenna Bass is a South African writer, filmmaker and former magician. Jenna has written the following screenplays: Flatland; Rafiki (with Wanuri Kahiu); Tok Tokkie; Tamam Shud; Seconds of White Noise (with Nikhil Singh) She has also worked as a documentary story consultant on: Zephany: The Lord Has Hidden, Life and Times of John C, The Use Of Orphans. In 2012, under her pseudonym, Constance Myburgh, she was shortlisted for the Caine Prize, Africa's leading literary award. She is currently a Story Consultant for animated TV Show produced by Triggerfish and Disney Mama K's Super 4. She is a Screenwriting lecturer at Cape Peninsula University of Technology and a Graduate Film Supervisor at University of Cape Town. Jenna is also the editor and cofounder of Jungle Jim, the illustrated pulp-literary magazine for African genre fiction.

Her multi-award winning films Zimbabwe-set short, The Tunnel, and entirely improvised debut feature, Love The One You Love have screened around the world, including Sundance, Berlinale, Göteborg, Busan and Durban International Film Festivals, where she has been heralded as ushering in a 'New Wave' of South African cinema. Her second feature, Flatland, opened Berlinale Panorama in 2019, and her new film, Mlungu Wam, premieres at TIFF Platform in 2021.

Executive Producer

Lucinda Englehart has produced multiple award-winning films released worldwide including, most recently, Kenya shot *The Elephant Queen* acquired by Apple TV+.

Lucinda Englehart has produced award-winning feature films and documentaries shot and released worldwide having opened at festivals including Cannes, Berlin, Sundance and Toronto. She produced Emmy nominated *The Elephant Queen* which was acquired by Apple TV+ and formed part of their inaugural slate in 2020 after a theatrical release by A24.

Producing Tribeca winner *My Marlon and Brando* took her to Turkey and the Middle East after years working in the South African film industry including Golden Bear winner *U-Carmen eKhayelitsha* and *Sea Point Days*. She was Head of Production at leading London-based film finance and production fund Aramid from 2008 - 2014. Aramid invested in over 40 films including *Blue Valentine*, *W.* and *In the Loop*. Lucinda studied Social and Political Sciences at the University of Cambridge and went on to do an Mphil in Political Transformation and Transitional Justice at the University of Cape Town where she lectured in film studies. Lucinda is currently Head of Content at Twyn, a new interactive entertainment format to be launched imminently. She has sat on festival juries including the feature Competition of the Abu Dhabi FF and is a member of BAFTA. Lucinda is based between UK and Kenya where she continues to build an exciting slate of films for production in the region.

Editor

Nadia Ben Rachid is a French-Tunisian film editor. She has over thirty years of experience, and has spent two decades working with filmmaker Abderrahmane Sissako, such as *Waiting for Happiness*, *Bamako* and *Life on Earth*. She won the award for Best Editing at the 2015 Césars for Sissako's 2014 film, *Timbuktu*. In 2017 she edited Shirin Neshat's *Looking for Oum Kulthum* (TIFF).

Ben Rachid has edited numerous documentaries, including all of Anne Aghion's films, the 2005 Emmy winner *In Rwanda We Say...The Family That Does Not Speak Dies* and *My Neighbor, My Killer* (Official Selection, Cannes Film Festival 2009). She edited *143 Sahara Street* by Hassen Ferhani, which premiered at Locarno International Film Festival in 2019.

Composer

Amine Bouhafa is a composer, orchestrator and musical director. He composed the score for Abderrahmane Sissako's *Timbuktu* which was nominated for an Academy Award and for which Amine won the Cesar Award for best original score. His more recent feature film scores include *Beauty and the Dogs* (Cannes Un Certain Regard 2017), for which he won the prize for 'Best Sound Creation,' Shirin Neshat's *Looking for Oum Kulthum* (TIFF 2017) and Amjad Abualala's *You Will Die at Twenty* (Venice Days 2019).