

MAKONGO FILMS / UNITÉ / KIRIPIFILMS PRESENT



72<sup>e</sup> Internationale  
Filmfestspiele  
Berlin  
Panorama

# WE, STUDENTS!

A FILM BY RAFIKI FARIALA



MAKONGO FILMS / UNITÉ / KIRIPIFILMS PRESENT WE, STUDENTS! A FILM BY RAFIKI FARIALA WITH NESTOR NGABANO NGUYTU / AARON KUTSIZONPOMO / BENJAMIN KEMBO SONDZI PRODUCED BY DAVID SAJANE / DANIELE INCALCATERA AND LEVIS SABIN NGABANO EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: DIEGO NARDO / CAROLINE NAMP / DAVID MAYER AND SANDRA MUYEMBA COSTUME DESIGNER: RAFFAELA BARILLA MUSIC BY: SANDRA SIMONE / CHRISTIAN NGOMA NGOMBE EDITOR: ANNE-ESTELLE MATESSOUZ POPPANO PRODUCTION DESIGNER: MARC-OLIVIER BRULLE EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: JACQUES-EMILE LECHEVREUILLE / ANNE-ESTELLE MATESSOUZ PRODUCED BY THE PARTY FOR SALES

MAKONGO FILMS UNITÉ KIRIPIFILMS                 

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82' / Central African Republic - France - Democratic  
Republic of Congo - Saudi Arabia / 2022

the party  
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## **SYNOPSIS**

**Nestor, Aaron, Benjamin and Rafiki are economics undergraduates at the University of Bangui. Navigating between the overcrowded classrooms, the petty trades that allow students to survive, bribery lurking everywhere, Rafiki shows us what students lives are like in the Central African Republic, a shattered society where the youth keeps dreaming of a brighter future for their country.**



# QUESTIONS TO THE DIRECTOR, RAFIKI FARIALA

## ***We, Students!* is your first feature. How did this project come about?**

I am a student myself at the University of Bangui and I wanted to show people what our life is like.

We study in fairly appalling conditions. The buildings, whose exterior is repainted every year for the national day parade, are rotting inside. Benches are stacked up; the ceilings are collapsing. When it rains, the rooms are flooded.

When I was in my first year, there were more than 1,000 students in one classroom. To stand a chance of getting into a class and having a table to sit at, you had to get up at 2:00 am. By 5:00 am, the room was already full. Often, lecturers don't even come, because they prefer to go and teach in private universities where they are better paid. So the students sleep on their benches, like sleepwalkers in a madhouse.

There are only poor people at our university. The children of rich families have all gone to study abroad.

We are all hungry. No one has a scholarship because you need connections to get one. As a result, the campus has become a sort of business centre with everyone doing deals in order to make ends meet.

How can anyone study in such conditions?

I told myself: someone has to tell this story.

## **How did you choose your characters, Nestor, Aaron and Benjamin?**

They are my friends. We have known each other since the first year. I first met Aaron who, like me, is of Congolese origin and also had a hard time getting his registration approved. We began by supporting each other, one keeping a seat in class for the other in the morning. Then

Aaron got a room on campus, and the four of us started using his room to sleep in when we were studying late and couldn't go home at night because of the insecurity that reigns in Bangui.

We worked together, we ate together, we slept in the same room, often in the same bed, as the film shows. We really shared the same life. We knew everything about each other: who was flirting with whom, how things were going with girls. We had no secrets from each other.

When you're students, you live together, you make plans, and you think things will always be like that. And then life parts you, you go your separate ways, you lose your illusions and sometimes you have to give up on your dreams. That's what I wanted to show.

In spite of everything, in the end, friendship is still there, despite the disappointments and resentment, and that's why I wanted to end on a positive and funny note, with the scene where Nestor and Aaron, back from the fields, bicker like an old couple.

### **How did shooting go?**

When we started shooting, there was a great deal of complicity among us. Aaron's room very quickly became the main set. As I knew exactly what my friends' lives were like, I knew what was interesting to show about them and how to film it. It was a wonderful collaboration. When Aaron was not being filmed, he held the boom and recorded the sound. Conversely, Bertille, with whom I had been introduced to film and who did the sound most of the time, occasionally stepped in front of the camera to take part in the scenes. At times, Nestor took the camera to film me. I loved working like this, with friends.

Filming took a long time, almost three years. And, as time went by, my friends began to lose heart. They didn't understand what I was getting at, they felt that shooting would never end. And, above all, jealousy reared its ugly head: Nestor failed his exam. Then the others couldn't find work. It was hell. Meanwhile, I was making progress. I had the opportunity to come to Europe to present my first film. My friends accused me of abandoning them. Things became difficult between us. In Bangui, we are not used to cinema and it is very complicated to film on the streets. I was arrested three times. Once, at the hospital, despite



its director's authorization, a militiaman called the military who came to arrest me. At the central market, it's even worse. When you take out a camera, there are always reactions. People get angry, they insult you and forbid you to film them. Or they stand in front of the camera to be filmed while talking nonsense. My technique is to sit down, chat with people and make allies before I start filming. I'm young, I smile a lot, I'm able to feel comfortable with others even when I don't know them, people welcome me.

The most difficult scene to shoot was the first one: the students in class. It's forbidden to film at the university, the lecturers are afraid that we will show all the nonsense they speak. Many of my classmates didn't want to do it either, because they didn't want to be seen cheating. In order to film, I first had to get permission from the Rector of the University, but meeting the Rector is not an easy thing in our country because he is more powerful than a minister. I had to be ingenious and say that I wanted to film the beauty of the buildings, the students who speak so well about their dreams, the teachers who give quality courses... It took me almost four months to get his signature.

There were some great moments of joy on the set too. I love filming so much! When I hold the camera I feel like I'm possessed. Since my first film, I love to do motorbike dolly shots in particular. Keeping tense to remain stable, I form one with my camera. Filming Aaron and Abigaëlle on the motorbike, with the two twins, the bleating goat and the chickens flapping their wings, what a delight!

**This film tells the story of a group of student friends but it also looks at the political situation in the Central African Republic. Why did you approach this subject from the angle of youth?**

I'm young and I like to film people I know and who are like me. Maybe when I'm old, I'll tell old people's stories! (laughter)

Already in my first film, *Mbi na Mo (You and Me)*, I told the story of two young people, Agougou and Emélie, who are expecting a baby. Agougou drives a motorcycle taxi, Emélie is still a student. They are beautiful, they love each other, but they are fighting to survive.



Being young in the Central African Republic is not easy. We turn up and there is no room for us. The places are taken, all doors are closed. No work, no money. The old men won't let us have anything, not even girlfriends. Because that's how it is at university. The lecturers say, "The female students are for us, go and get your girlfriends from high school."

The situation of girls really touched me and I wanted to talk about it in the film, even though it is shot from the point of view of boys. Sexual harassment is a real scourge at university. Girls don't easily speak out, they remain discreet. They don't dare to dress up for fear of attracting a lecturer's attention. If they do, they risk a lot. If they refuse the teacher's advances, they will be blocked in their studies, their good grades will disappear, replaced by zeros. And, for us boys, it's dangerous too: if we date a girl a lecturer wants, we risk being blocked too.

There are many burdens on our sexuality: the fear that the girl will get pregnant because contraception is not widespread, the fear of disease, the fear that her family will sue you and ask for dowry money. It is difficult for us to live out our youth.

### **Music plays a very important role in the film, you are the one who sings. Why did you choose to put yourself in the spotlight?**

In the film, I am behind the camera (and, at rare moments, in front of it), but I also sing. For me it's natural: I was a singer before I became a director, I cannot imagine a film without music.

At the beginning of the film, I show myself singing. It seemed essential to me to make the viewer understand that the voice singing is that of the director holding the camera. This changes the way we perceive the images that follow. This is not a documentary made by a director about students. It is the story of a student who picks up a camera and starts filming himself and his friends to say: this is who we are, look at us, listen to us!

And so I imagined this particular device of a film accompanied by my sung voice-over. I film and I sing, that is who I am.

The songs allow me to get into the minds of my characters, to express

their feelings. In the Central African Republic, tragic things happen all the time, but people don't talk about them, they keep their anger or sadness inside, and that makes them bitter and unhappy.

My songs express what we have to say. They're our manifesto. We, the students. We, the young people.

I sing about our anger and revolt. Why is the state abandoning us? What will be the future of Central African youth? Drink? Armed action? You don't turn your back on young people!

### **We, Students! is the first Central African film ever presented at the Berlinale. What is the situation of cinema in your country, the Central African Republic?**

Cinema is under-developed in my country. The only film in the history of Central African cinema is still a reference: *Le Silence de la forêt* by Didier Ouénangaré and Bassek Ba Kobhio, which was selected for the Cannes Directors' Fortnight in 2003. After that, nothing more. In the 2010s, nothing happened in our country in the field of cinema: no film school, no production companies, no directors, no trained technicians.

The Central African Republic has been plunged into chronic instability since the mid-1990s. One military coup has followed another. This cycle of violence culminated in the Séléka coalition of rebels taking power in 2013, plunging the country into chaos. Since 2016, calm has returned to Bangui and the country is being rebuilt with the help of the international community, but two-thirds of its territory is still occupied by rebel groups.

In 2017, the Ateliers Varan, an association of documentary filmmakers founded by the director Jean Rouch, launched a documentary filmmaking training course at the Alliance française in Bangui. This was a first for the Central African Republic, where there was no training in this field. I had just graduated from high school and was starting my first year of economics. I knew nothing about cinema, but my friends urged me on, I applied, and incredibly, I was selected. I was the youngest one on the course.

With the Ateliers Varan, I discovered direct cinema, a very simple

approach to filmmaking, directly in touch with reality and the characters filmed. This is how I was able to make my first film, *Mbi na Mo*, a 28-minute short.

There is a whole group of us, I am not alone. My older colleague, Elvis Sabin Ngaïbino, made *Makongo*, a documentary about two Pygmies, which has won awards at festivals around the world.

And today a new training course is underway, CinéBangui, to train young people in the various professions of fiction cinema. Things are moving ahead and I think people are going to hear more about Central African cinema.





# DIRECTOR'S BIO

Born on november 17, 1997 in Uvira, Kivu (DRC), of Congolese parents, Fariala Alolea Albert (aka Rafiki Fariala) arrived early in the Central African Republic, where his parents took refuge because of the war. He studied at Padre Pio Catholic School (2006-2009), at the seminary *Enfant Jésus des Pères Carmes Déchaux* (2010-2013), then at *Lycée d'Application de l'École normale Supérieure de Bangui* (2013-2016), where he received his Baccalauréat.

At the seminary, he directs the choir and develops his voice. Later, he falls in love with the music of Makoma, a religious group. Entirely self-taught, he starts composing music.

In 2013, under the pseudonym RAFIKI - RH20, he records his first piece *Why war?* which becomes a hit. From then on, he composes many other songs and becomes one of the promising figures of Bangui's musical scene.

In 2017, he is selected among 150 candidates to take part in the documentary workshop organised in Bangui by Ateliers Varan. At the end of the workshop, he directs his first film, *Mbi na Mo (You and Me)*. The film is selected at the Lausanne, Montréal, St Denis and Lille festivals, and at the Biarritz FIPADOC.

# CREW

A FILM BY **RAFIKI FARIALA**

WITH **NESTOR NGBANDI NGOUYOU  
AARON KOYASOUKPENGO  
BENJAMIN KONGBO SOMBOT**

CINEMATOGRAPHER **RAFIKI FARIALA**

EDITING **XAVIER SIRVEN  
CHRISTIAN MOÏSE NZENGUE**

SOUND **ANNE-BERTILLE NDEYSSEIT VOPIANDE**

SOUND EDITING **MARC-OLIVIER BRULLÉ**

MIXING **PAUL JOUSSELIN**

PRODUCED BY **BORIS LOJKINE  
DANIELE INCALCATERRA  
ELVIS SABIN NGAÏBINO**

ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS **DIEUDO HAMADI  
CAROLINE NATAF  
BRUNO NAHON  
THOMAS MORVAN**

POST-PRODUCTION MANAGER **ASTRID LECARDONNEL**



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