Cannes adopts the abandoned Kenyan baby

Wanuri Kahiu’s Rafiki has been banned in its home country for portraying a lesbian relationship

NAMRATA JOSHI
CANNES

A standing ovation was garnered at Festival de Cannes on Wednesday by a little film – Wanuri Kahiu’s Rafiki (Friend). Abandoned by its home country, Kenya, where it has been banned for its portrayal of a lesbian relationship, Rafiki appears to have been lovingly adopted by the festival with the artistic director Thierry Fremaux applauding spiritedly along with the rest in the packed Salle Debussy theatre.

At the screening, Ms. Kahiu said that even though what has been happening in Kenya is heart-breaking, the cast and crew were proud to be Kenyans and that they hoped that the film would make the audience fall in love with the country. The film is a first for Kenya at the festival.

Indeed it is the presence and performance of the little-known cast specially the two young leading ladies – Samantha Mugatsia (Kena) and Sheila Munyiva (Ziki) – that gave freshness to Rafiki. Otherwise it hardly breaks any new ground when it comes to the LGBTQIA cinema. The only layer of possible complexity in the plot is the barely-explored backdrop of electoral politics, with the fathers of the two girls as rivals in a local poll. If Call Me By Your Name was criticised for too little sex, Rafiki has almost none.

In fact there is an overwhelming innocence and purity about the lovers. It’s like any other sweet teenage romance complete with a love-at-first-sight moment and pop music to boot.

Another film from Egypt, Abu Bakr Shawky’s Yomeddine (Judgement Day) is an interesting idea lost in execution. Beshay, a man cured of leprosy (played by non-professional Rady Gamal among others in the cast) goes in search of the family that abandoned him. Giving him company is an orphan boy.

Some genuinely affecting moments – Beshay crying out in public that he is a human being – get sidelined in the familiar, manipulative “triumph of the underdog” arc.

Nostalgia trip
Rafiki and Yomeddine are not the only underdogs that Cannes is championing this year. Set in Leningrad of the 80s, Leto (Summer) – a beautifully presented black and white slice of Russian rock culture scene in the Brezhnev era – has been directed by Kirill Serebrennikov, currently under house arrest in Russia, just like another Palme d’Or contender, Iran’s Jafar Panahi.

Leto takes the audience on a nostalgic musical trip of sorts and also into the heart of a unique triangular love story, based on the memoirs of Natalia Naumenko and the two men in her life, her musician husband Mike of the Zoopark group and her lover, songwriter Viktor Tsoi of the group Kino.

The cinematic strength of the former USSR seems to shine bright this year, as it did in 2017. Apart from Leto, the inaugural film of the Un Certain Regard section, Ukrainian Sergei Loznitsa’s Donbass has been the strongest, political sledgehammer of a film seen so far.