

## FILM REVIEW

The 32nd New York African Film Festival, New York City, 1–31 May 2025

For the past thirty-two years, the New York African Film Festival (NYAFF) has engaged communities locally and internationally, and this year, 2025, the festival was a wonderful fulfillment of that mission. The annual festival has been a space of dialogue, a platform for African and African diasporic voices representing a diversity of experiences. But it has become more than that, as was evident from this year's festival. For many filmmakers and film fans, the festival is also a home.

The main festival is held in several spaces, stretching across the entire month of May. It begins in the middle of Manhattan, at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts. Every year, its opening night promises a gorgeous occasion with filmmakers, actors, and their fans in the audience dressed in fine attire, and this year did not disappoint. The following weekend, the festival moves to Maysles Documentary Center in the heart of Harlem, just a few blocks from the famous Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Apollo Theater, and the African market. For its third weekend, it teams up with Dance Africa at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), where, in addition to watching movies, patrons can also watch dance performances and enjoy the street festival outside. Finally, this year, the NYAFF concluded the month of May with an outdoor screening at St. Nicholas Park in Harlem, which was free and open to the public.

This year, I saw so many films in such a short amount of time that it would be impossible for me to list all of them in the limited space allowed in this brief review, and one can access the complete program online. The opening night film this year was *Freedom Way*, a debut feature by Nigerian director Afolabi Olalekan. This dramatic film explores how the corruption of politicians and police stifles entrepreneurial ingenuity and is remarkable for how its complex plot reveals interconnections between people of diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. After that, two highlights for me were *The Fisherman*, directed by Zoey Martinson (Ghana), and *Memories of Love Returned*, directed by Ntare Guma Mbaho Mwine (Uganda). *The Fisherman* is Martinson's first feature-length film—a magical realist comedy, both humorous and touching, about an aging fisherman struggling with a technologically and economically changing world. The coastline is affected by climate change and the local fishermen compete with illegal, multinational corporate fisheries. The movie includes a magical talking fish and other characters played by local Ghanaian social media personalities. Throughout, the fisherman and his band of misfit youth debate gender roles, religion, technology, and business strategies. In contrast, *Memories of Love Returned* is a meditation on the power of the photographic image. It took the filmmaker more


than twenty years to make his documentary that recovers the photography of Kibaate Aloysius Ssalongo in the small town Mbisi, but the act of recovery has a transformative effect on the town and eventually raises questions about how we conceptualize gender.

The festival programmers take care to include films from across Africa and its Diaspora, including the Caribbean and Latin America. The programmers review more than 400 films each year before selecting about 110 features and shorts. In addition to reviewing submissions, the programmers actively research and curate films and maintain longtime associations with filmmakers and film archives such as the University of California, Los Angeles and the New York Public Library. They do not simply curate a selection of good new films, but rather they take care to curate dialogue across films and across the archive. As part of their goal to foster an intellectual experience, each year a different country receives special attention at Lincoln Center, which means that in addition to a new movie from that country, the festival programmers also work with film archivists to exhibit an older classic. This year, Lincoln Center spotlighted the Democratic Republic Congo by offering four films from there, including the powerful 2024 documentary *Rising Up at Night* by Nelson Makengo, followed by the 1998 classic *Identity Pieces* by Mwezé Ngangura. Something similar happens at the BAM, but at BAM the choice of country coincides with the dance festival—Dance Africa—which this year featured the Song and Dance Company of Mozambique. The film festival supported the dance program by including a new film from Mozambique, *The Night Still Smells like Gunpowder* by Inadelso Cossa, alongside that country's 1979 classic *Mueda, Memória e Massacre* by Ruy Guerra. Outside BAM, the city streets were crowded with vendors selling food and art, while musicians filled the streets with sound, so that the entire neighborhood vibrated with energetic Afrocentricity.

Important for the NYAFF is its relationship to other community organizations and institutions, and it is this community engagement that has been important for me personally, as a professor teaching African cinema to my students in New York. For example, since this year's festival included three literary adaptations—*Katanga: Dance of the Scorpions* (directed by Dani Kouyaté), *The Man Died* (directed by Awam Amkpa), and *So Long the Letter* (directed by Angèle Diabeng)—the festival partnered with the Brooklyn Public Library to host a conversation about adapting literature to film with Diabeng, whose adaptation of the Senegalese classic novel *So Long the Letter* by Mariama Bâ had been screened the previous day. Diasporic communities come out to support their filmmakers, so the Q&A is often a lively affair where a member of the audience might have personal connection to the film's subject matter or may even, on rare occasions, break out into joyful song like modern-day *griots*, as happened on the evening when Fatou Cissé, the daughter of the famous filmmaker Souleymane Cissé, showed her new film *Furu*, a dramatic critique of forced marriage. Although many film enthusiasts experienced the festival for the first time during its main events in May, in fact its relationship to local communities is year-long, and its reach is global. The NYAFF extends beyond New York, supporting dialogue and film exhibition of African cinema across the United States through its in-school lecture series and its national travelling series. Moreover, through its global

network, the NYAFF has actively supported African film festivals in other countries such as the Mostra de Cinemas Africanos in Brazil.

Several filmmakers remarked on the festival not just as a place for exhibiting their art and networking with potential distributors, but also as a space of mentorship and community building. Abderrahmane Sissako, for example, is one of the most well-regarded filmmakers in the world today with such films as *Life on Earth* (1998), *Heremakono* (2002), *Bamako* (2006), and *Timbuktu* (2014), and was at the festival this year to screen his new film *Black Tea*, an exquisitely meditative and poetic film about a romance between an African woman and a Chinese tea merchant. It indexes a vibrant African community in China. Following the film, Sissako remarked that he first came to this festival as a young man straight out of film school to show a short film, and now, decades later, returning to the NYAFF always felt like coming home for him. Similarly, during the Q&A about her debut feature, Angèle Diabeng thanked NYAFF for encouraging her to complete her adaptation of *So Long a Letter* when it was still just a blossoming idea in her mind. On a personal note, I began attending the NYAFF after I moved to New York in 2012. Since then, I have attended the festival every year. Now, writing this review as I prepare to move to Tennessee for a new faculty position, I am stirred to reflect on the debt of gratitude that I owe NYAFF for providing a space where I could not only access films but also grow and develop intellectually as a scholar.

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