

Arts & ENTERTAINMENT

Disney film 'Queen of Katwe' Inspires



You have seen underdog movies. You have seen movies about people who scrambled out of poverty. But the new Disney film "Queen of Katwe" still has things to teach you.

As Tim Crothers wrote for ESPN The Magazine, "To be African is to be an underdog in the world. To be Ugandan is to be an underdog in Africa. To be from Katwe [a slum in Kampala] is to be an underdog in Uganda. And finally, to be female is to be an underdog in Katwe." That perspective grounded Crother's profile of Ugandan chess prodigy Phiona Mutesi, which began as an article and then became a book, "The Queen of Katwe: One Girl's Triumphant Path to Becoming a Chess Champion" -- and then the basis for this film.

Its director, Mira Nair (who directed "Monsoon Wedding," "The Reluctant Fundamentalist," and an unusually eclectic array of other films), has been living six months of each year in Kampala for the past 27 years, and has approached this film with the wisdom of an insider and the curiosity of someone who listens well. As she has said, "If we don't tell our own stories, no one else will." Indeed, American films, which so dominate the international film market, rarely feature African stories; the few that do focus on war and generally involve a white American or European protagonist.

This is a rare opportunity to see an African story, filmed in Africa, by a director who lives there, and featuring all African actors (including its well-known stars, David Oyelowo ("Selma") and Lupita Nyong'o ("12 Years a Slave")). (Oyelowo was born in England to Nigerian parents, and Nyong'o grew up in Kenya.) Nair estimates that 80 of the 100 or so others who appear in the film as actors or extras had never been on camera before. She has enlisted them to embody a story that feels like theirs in all its particulars, a delicious pleasure for us and, I imagine, for them, and particularly for Oyelowo and Nyong'o.

Phiona is played by Madina



PHOTO COURTESY DISNEY

Madina Nalwanga concentrates at the chess board in her role as the chess prodigy Phiona Mutesi in the new Disney film 'Queen of Katwe.'

Nalwanga, who, like her character, is from the slums of Kampala and sold corn on the street as a child. She conveys Phiona's grave, watchful intelligence as a young girl who lives in Katwe with her mother and two younger brothers. Phiona, whose father died of AIDS when she was three years old, didn't know how to read or write since an education must be paid for and obtaining food, clean water, and shelter were already a daily struggle for the family. She and her brother certainly had no knowledge of chess before they wandered into the Sports Outreach Institute run by Robert Katende (played by Oyelowo), a minister who

offered porridge to attract children to a game that would engage their minds and enlist the creativity and will to survive that they already relied on each day.

Phiona showed early promise at chess, which is thought by many Africans to be a white person's pursuit and which, in Africa, is mainly played by those privileged enough to be educated. From his own experiences, Katende recognized the power of this game to show the poorest and most deprived children unexpected ways to employ their native intelligence and necessary resourcefulness to compete on

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