

# I AM NOT A WITCH

UK, France, Germany (2017) 93 minutes

**Director:** Rungano Nyoni

**Cast:** Maggie Mulubwa, Nellie Munamonga, Dyna Mufuni, Nancy Murilo



**Screening 21 November 2018 at Swindon Arts Centre**

## Synopsis

Following a banal incident in her local village, 8-year old girl Shula is accused of witchcraft. After a short trial she is found guilty, taken into state custody and exiled to a witch camp in the middle of a desert. Like the other residents, Shula is tied to a ribbon which is attached to a coil that perches in a large tree. She is told that should she ever cut the ribbon, she'll be cursed and transformed into a goat.

## Reviews



"I visited witch camps in Zambia and Ghana," says *I Am Not a Witch* director Rungano Nyoni. "They are very disorganised and sparse and run by different chiefs."

IA witch camp is a settlement that gives refuge to women accused of being witches. They are most prevalent in Ghana where the government has announced an initiative to close witch camps and teach the population that witches do not in fact exist.

"There is nothing extraordinary about witch camps," says Nyoni. "They are like normal villages but populated by older women. They have the women working on the land and doing everyday activities."

It is the philosophy and the sexism behind them that drove the 35-year-old director to make her debut film about these enclaves. "I am just trying to point out the absurdity of something that is misogynistic," she says. "In my research, I found that the way that these people who held witches talked about women were extraordinary, so the film came from a place of anger."

The director has channelled that anger into comedy; a cruel humour that has had audiences wondering whether they should laugh or cry, ever since the film received its world premiere at the Cannes Film Festival. "The best way for me to vent this anger was through a cruel humour, it's a Zambian sense of humour which tends to be cruel. We have this hang up that we see in Britain of hierarchies where the middle class can't laugh at the working class."

*Kaleem Aftab, Independent*

In a remote Zambian village, a nine-year-old girl is accused of being a witch and given a stark choice: to accept her supernatural branding and live a tethered life as a sorceress, or to cut her ties with local tradition and be transformed into a goat that may be killed and eaten for supper. Thus begins this bewilderingly strange yet terrifically sure-footed feature debut from writer-director Rungano Nyoni. Her daringly satirical parable of magic and misogyny, superstition and social strictures confirms her promise as a film-maker.

The young heroine of *I Am Not a Witch* is sent to the local "witch camp", an enslaved tourist attraction. Here, the women offer a sense of community and protection to the all-but-silent newcomer, whom they name Shula (it means 'to be uprooted'). But when government official Mr Banda declares that "you are my little witch now", a strange form of celebrity looms. Soon, Shula is being paraded around local courts and TV stations, dispensing divine justice and hawking magical eggs – all for the profit of her garrulous keeper. "What if she's actually just a child?" asks the presenter of the Smooth Talk chatshow, a question that is met with stony silence from her "state guardian".

Nyoni was apparently inspired by real-life reports of witchcraft accusations in Zambia, and her research took her to Ghana, where she became the first foreigner to sleep in one of the world's oldest "witch camps". Here, she observed first hand the daily rituals of these women whose fates have been sealed by "nothing more than hearsay".

*Mark Kermode, Observer*

## Film Facts

- The director won a BAFTA for this film for Outstanding Debut by a British Writer, Director or Producer.
- She lived in a witch camp in Ghana for a month, while researching this film.
- She was born in Lusaka, Zambia, but she moved with her family to Cardiff, when she was eight years old.
- Her name "Rungano" means "story-teller".