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Slum boy shines in award-winning international film

Story by ARNO KOPECKY
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Ignatius Juma, 12, displays a DVD of the 'Kibera Kid' movie in which he played the lead role.
Photo/CHRIS OJOW

Twelve minutes was all it took to change the life of Ignatius Juma. That's the play time of "Kibera Kid," an award-winning film Juma starred in at the age of 12.

Rare as it is for any Kenyan to take a lead role in an internationally acclaimed movie, it is literally unheard of for a ghetto child with no prior acting experience.

But "Kibera Kid" may be a sign of things to come. After winning the Best Short Film category at the 2006 Kenya International Film

Festival, a feature-length version of the same title is now in the works.

Like the original, it will be shot entirely on location in the sprawling Kibera, showcasing an all-locals cast with a home-grown plot that describes life in Africa's second largest slum.

Juma, now 14 and remarkably self-possessed, is still young enough to play the lead role a second time round.

"I'm very lucky," he acknowledged during a recent interview outside Olympic Primary School, just a few metres from the Kibera home in Nairobi he grew up in.

"Not many people get the chance I did," he confesses.

That chance came courtesy of producer/director Nathan Collett, who scoured the length and breadth of Kibera to find someone to play a lead role in his film.

"We were looking for someone who was confident and relaxed," Mr Collett told the *Saturday Nation* adding that "Juma was the most outgoing of them all."

"Kibera Kid," is reminiscent of the Brazilian movie "City of God," which likewise stars slum residents in their home setting.

"I just acted like normal," Juma says, adding that the movie was a fair portrayal of life in Kibera.



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Born and raised in the slum, Juma speaks from experience. His father abandoned the family seven years ago, leaving his mother Mary Wabwire with nothing.

For a long time, Ms Wabwire struggled to feed her four remaining children (two went with the father) by vending water.

Brief period

Unable to afford school fees, Juma spent a brief period in the streets until an Australian missionary heard of Ms Wabwire's story and gave her Sh1,000 as business capital. She was able to start selling candies from a stall, paving way for Juma to return to school. To this day, however, the family seldom manages more than a single meal a day.

"You know, I've seen many kids join gangs, and I came close myself," Juma said, who despite the ongoing hardships greets the future with a smile.

He is now working on a rap album with a friend and says if acting doesn't work out, he might try to become President some day.

"When people saw me act in a movie, they saw anything was possible," he says.

Godfrey Ojiambo, who plays opposite Juma as "Kibera Kid's" ruthless gang leader, can only agree.

"Both in the plot and in real life, Juma is a role model," he said. "The movie shows that there are other ways to make it than just the gangs."

Yet Ojiambo, 27, admits that it hasn't always been easy. A native of Kibera himself, he spent time in the gangs and speaks of the movie's accurate portrayal of that life.

"There were things people told me to do that my character now tells others to do," he said. What's more, acting hasn't always been the easiest alternative," he says.

"The Kenyan movie industry is not rising as fast as we hoped it would," he said noting that "for a long time it was just about money, about how fast producers could make a buck. Corruption was a problem, because good roles would often go to bad actors just because of who they knew."

Looks better

But with the backing of Mr Collett, the future looks better than ever for Juma and Ojiambo.


"People are starting to realize it's not just about money, it's about quality," Ojiambo said.


Nowhere is this more true than in the original "Kibera Kid," which was shot on such a tight budget that none of the actors were even paid. "But the exposure made up for it," Ojiambo asserted.


Ojiambo and Collett were equally happy that both versions of the film promote pure Kibera talent.

As for Mr Collett, he hopes the movie will mark the beginning of a new trend for Kenya's fledgeling movie industry and the actors who struggle to make a living by it.



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