

# FILM REVIEW

**Dare Olaitan, director. *Knockout Blessing*.** 2018. 102 minutes. English and Yoruba (with English subtitles). Nigeria. Genesis Distribution. No Price Reported.

Dare Olaitan's follow-up to his sparkling debut *Ojukokoro* is a warm-hearted but uneven caper about an aspiring female boxer who unwittingly gets entangled in an obscene political plot. *Knockout Blessing* is the latest take on "New Nollywood," as it attempts to combine the soulfulness of the earlier Nollywood movies with adherence to international filmmaking conventions in order to make it legible to a global metropolitan audience. As such, the film has already inspired an emergent scholarship, initiated by Noah Tsika in *Africa is a Country* (Tsika 2019).

Blessing is a teenage girl living in rural Yorubaland. An orphan brought up by her champion-boxer grandfather Seyi George, she struggles to fit in. She dreams of competing in the amateur boxing championships in Aba and spends her time honing the same knockout punch that took Seyi George to the top. However, tragedy strikes, and she flees to Lagos. Once there, she accidentally saves Oby and Hannah, out-of-work prostitutes who are in trouble with a client. The three join forces and are soon discovered by Oby's racketeer friend Dagogo. The gangster boss realizes the three girls' potential and turns them into a criminal gang, a kind of wayward Nigerian *Charlie's Angels*. Preying on the city's wealthy curb-crawlers, they are striking it rich until greed leads them to a plot that takes them out of their depth.

The film is ambitiously eclectic, combining elements of drama, action-thriller, and comedy. The result is a somewhat disjointed composition, with the discordant elements jarring with, rather than enhancing, each other. This impression is underscored by the widely divergent reactions of the viewers. From the point of view of this corresponding reviewer, the drama and comedy elements are more convincing. The sharp and realistic banter between the prostitutes humanizes them; the early scenes in the village are poetic, almost operatic, with beautiful scenery, and there is a rising tension and real surprise in the aftermath of Blessing's fight. The comedy is original, and the set-piece skits achieve effective satire. Standouts include the mobile phone ringing in the middle of the juju ceremony and the scene of the curb-crawling man explaining to his dumbfounded wife what he was doing by the

roadside with a group of women at 2 am. The main action-thriller body of the film, by contrast, feels derivative and hackneyed, with strong references to classics such as *The Godfather*.


Strikingly, the Nigerian co-reviewers had the almost exact opposite reaction, as they saw the middle action-thriller stanza as the film's strength. For them, the story of a meek character finding the strength to challenge the elite before being overcome by greed, which eventually leads to disaster, is a purposeful moral tale. They found the reworking of Hollywood tropes, such as the appropriation of Jason Statham's character Frank Martin from *The Transporter*, to be an artful and effective way to explore these themes. In their view, the comedy detracts from these serious lessons; the slapstick nature of the juju shrine seems over the top, and the sight of a traditional doctor exclaiming "Blood of Jesus!" is ridiculous. Likewise, while I saw a poetic beauty in the village scenes, they perceived these depictions as banal and rather wide of the mark. To them, the depiction of the banana plantation fails to ring true, and the sight of a Yoruba village man kissing his granddaughter on the forehead is an outrageously inauthentic display of affection.

The film's lack of cohesion is compounded by the flimsiness of the title character, which leaves a strange emptiness at its heart. Blessing fails to undergo a transformation in the wake of two deaths, and she just seems to forget about her dream of competing in the boxing championship. This problem is heightened by the paucity of actress Ade Laoye's actual boxing skills, which lends the "knockout" punches a bizarre slapstick quality. The combination of her understated appearance, monosyllabic delivery, and jack-in-the-box punch creates the impression more of a kind of magic troll than of an accomplished heroine. Olaitan's direction here is a particular pity, given Laoye's vivacious performances in recent productions such as *Yelo Peppè* and *Flat: 3B*. In contrast, it is the supporting characters played by the older cast that have the real depth, with striking performances from Mary Kowo as Madam Tina, Gbenga Titoloye as Baba Seyi George, Iyke Michael as Ibrahim, Scarlet Gomez as his on-screen wife Bisola, and Bucci Franklin as Dagogo.

One great strength of *Knockout Blessing*—as in Olaitan's earlier work—is the adept use of broad vernacular in its script. Local languages are at the heart of Nollywood's magic, especially its humor, and Olaitan is correct in treating this as a non-negotiable element in his vision of New Nollywood. He utilizes a range of languages and dialects, including Nigerian Pidgin, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and Nigerian Standard English. The director expertly conveys the Pidgin's ingenuity and wit; in one standout line to express the complexity of making fake passports, the character Dagogo asserts that it involves "photostat, photocopy, and photosynthesis!" Interestingly, in addition to standard Pidgin, Olaitan employs contemporary "street pidgin," which produces an element of surprise even for standard pidgin speakers. On being asked, "Are you sure, sir?" the character Dagogo responds, "HIV positive!"

While Olaitan's latest experiment is overall less successful than his debut film, he has made an enterprising attempt to break down the barriers

between old and new Nollywood; although far from a shutout, *Knockout Blessing* is just about a winner on points.

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