

# FILM REVIEW

**Kemi Adetiba, dir. *King of Boys*.** 2018. 169 min. English, Yoruba, Pidgin, and Hausa, with English subtitles. Nigeria. Kemi Adetiba Visuals. Streaming on Netflix. No price reported.

Kemi Adetiba debuted as a feature film director with *The Wedding Party* in 2016 (see my review in *ASR* 60.3), a blockbuster rom com and comedy of manners that smashed all Nigerian box office records. *King of Boys*, her subsequent film, followed this success with a spectacular demonstration of auteurist willfulness and ambition. Adetiba wrote, produced, and largely self-funded it in addition to acting as director. Crime films represent a genre that is viewed warily by the multiplex cinemas which have acquired enormous clout over the high end of the Nigerian film industry, and this film was twice as long as a normal film, meaning the theaters that showed it would sell half as many tickets. After Lagos was already festooned with banners and electronic billboards advertising the film, its release was delayed while, succumbing to pressure, Adetiba cut out half an hour, leaving a film that still runs nearly three hours. However, it doesn't seem so long, because it moves so quickly and is full of variety.

Adetiba cites as inspirations the 2002 Brazilian film *City of God* (directed by Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund), for its Third World grittiness and tropical color, and Coppola's *The Godfather*, for its psychological depth as a biopic and crime family chronicle, and for its scope as a study of the intersection of organized crime and politics.

We meet the protagonist, Eniola Salami (Sola Sobowale), at the pinnacle of her power, as she celebrates her birthday in her Lagos mansion with a lavish party, attended by the elite from the governor on down. She slips away to take care of business in a back room, personally doing hideous violence to a thug who has betrayed her. We are never under any illusions about the source of her power.


Flashbacks scattered throughout the film supply Eniola's backstory; she ran away from a violently abusive father when she was barely an adolescent and turned to prostitution to survive, eventually marrying a drug-dealing crime boss and inheriting—through violence—his business and his seat at the head of the table of Lagos crime bosses. Now she wants to cash in on her

support over the years for many political campaigns. She has been promised a commissionership, but the appointment doesn't come through, as the powers that be have developed cold feet about her notorious reputation. Simultaneously, a prosecutor—a principled man in a deeply corrupt system—is prying into her business affairs. She has family problems too; her adopted daughter Kemi (Adesua Etomi), her lawyer and right hand, is a sophisticated and coolly self-possessed beauty, clearly capable of taking the family to the next level, but her son is a playboy, a weakling, and a fool.

All of this distracts Eniola from her primary job, which is controlling the business of the underworld. In a fit of inattention, she gives Makanaki (Remilekun “Reminisce” Safaru), an ambitious and violent young criminal, permission to carry out robberies against two powerful politicians who hide vast amounts of ill-gotten cash at home and therefore will not be able to declare it missing. The politicians and the power structure they are part of assume, incorrectly, that the robberies are Eniola's response to the denial of her appointment. And Eniola's relationship with Makanaki deteriorates to open war as he tries to displace her as “king” of the underworld.

Working all this out fills the film's epic length, and—in spite of some minor problems with plot management—it is a pleasure to watch. The acting is almost uniformly excellent and the casting is interesting. As Eniola, Sola Sobowale gives a galvanic performance of great and unexpected range. She had a previous career in soap operas and then disappeared, reemerging in a brilliant, caricatural role as the mother of the bride in *The Wedding Party*. (Toni Tones does a superb job playing the younger Eniola.) Jide Kosoko and Akin Lewis—both national treasures—embody different branches of the rotting but still lascivious patriarchy. The gangster Makinaki and his partner are played by two noted rappers, who are also on the soundtrack; Adetiba's background as a music video director is also evident in the quick editing and stylized images.

As in *The Wedding Party*, Adetiba appropriates a major American film genre and fills it with sharp-eyed observations of Nigerian society in all its density and complexity. Here, the emphasis is less on personal foibles and more on how power works, by turns subtly negotiated and brutal—a devastating indictment of national corruption packaged as proverb-strewn entertainment. First and last, the film is a tribute to the gigantic personality of a woman who would be king. In another sign of Nollywood's evolving position in the global mediascape, *King of Boys 2* is coming soon as a Netflix original.

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