

Intimate Strangers, Farewell Amor

Kólá Túbòsún

February 10, 2021



The compelling opening scene of *Farewell Amor* is set in one of the arrival gates of the John F. Kennedy international airport in New York. A Brooklyn taxi driver (Walter), played by Ntare Guma Mbaho Mwine, is clutching a bunch of flowers and a gift bag while pacing the floors nervously.

He is soon joined by his family; wife Esther (Zainab Jah) and daughter Sylvia (Jayme Lawson). Originally from Angola, the family fled the civil war to Tanzania to live as refugees at a time when Sylvia was a baby. Later Walter would move to New York where he would spend seventeen years stuck in documentation limbo, petitioning to get his family to join him.

Inspired by an earlier 2016 short, *Farewell Meu Amor* also by director Ekwa Msangi, this feature length deals in economy, skipping details of this family history and choosing to reveal only bits in snatches of conversation. It is an emotional scene that Msangi builds out, this opening, but also an awkward one for the trio of characters.

Walter hands his wife the flowers and hugs her tight. “Amor” she moans, releasing a lot of the tension and frustrations of the preceding years. Walter reaches out a hand to touch his now adolescent daughter. At this moment, they are a family once again. But individually, they are three strangers just starting to know one another all over again.

Msangi’s debut feature length which premiered in competition last January at the Sundance film festival and was released in theatres and online in December takes an underappreciated part of the immigrant experience and molds it into a solid, affecting and empathetic piece of cinema.

Even though she was born in the USA to immigrants from Tanzania, Msangi considers herself somewhat of an outsider having lived in both countries at different times. Her parents were Fulbright scholars who moved back to Tanzania after their studies. This self-awareness is manifest in

the ways that Msangi films the streets and city of pre-pandemic New York, both with a native's familiarity and the fresh curiosity of a visitor. Her film takes inspiration from a personal story, an uncle of hers who arrived in the US on a student visa in 1996 and is yet to be reconnected with his family till this day. Farewell Amor is an evocative imagination of what could be if that family were united today.

In Walter's tiny Brooklyn apartment, the family begins to build their relationship with one another brick by brick. Msangi unspools this (re)discovery process through the three separate viewpoints involved. Farewell Amor is divided cleverly into three distinct acts starting with Walter before coming to a conclusion that neatly threads the three personal stories into a whole.

Mwine is sturdy as Walter, a relatable fellow torn between his duty to family and a lover who has provided him with companionship in the absence of his wife. This conflict builds slowly and erupts in the most intimate of spaces as Walter and Esther struggle to reacquaint themselves with their bodies and with mutual understandings expressed.

The emotional and psychological toll that forced immigration takes on families is broken down to a granular level by Msangi's screenplay. Farewell Amor isn't primarily interested in the political, historical or structural factors responsible for keeping the family apart for so long even though the characters talk about it clearly enough. Minutely observed, the film details how each member of the family adjusts to the pressures and challenges of their lives as immigrants in America.

Deeply traumatized by the horrors of the past, Esther (Jah turning in an intelligent performance) drowns her fears in religion. Her obsession with piety and her money guzzling church provides some solace for her but further strains relations with her loved ones. With his extramarital relationship no longer tenable, Walter holds on to his one true love, dance. It is a gift he has passed on to his daughter Sylvia who has struggles of her own fitting into her new high school.

Dance features prominently in Farewell Amor, as do music and religion as Msangi explores how they become viable coping mechanisms for immigrants working out feelings of displacement. The Kizomba dance, a sensuous couple's sway which Walter favors becomes a metaphor for examining the breakdown in relations between the couple. Where Walter and Esther were once in step and locked in, by the time they meet again at the airport they are graceless, floating apart and not quite attuned to the other anymore.

For Sylvia, her participation in a dance competition and gradual embrace of her home grown Kuduro dance moves represent the chance of shedding some of her sullen disposition and integrating into the tricky school social system. But it also helps with the more important process of finding and owning her space within the new environment. The teachable lesson being that immigrants sometimes have to stand out to fit in.

The soundtrack is alive and pulsing with contemporary and folk music from Angolan artists such as Bonga and Kyaku Kyadaff. Bruce Francis Cole's cinematography is luminous, capturing the beauty of the actors in their natural states through close ups. Even though Farewell Amor is a quiet, intimately drawn drama, the pacing keeps things flowing briskly with Msangi's handling of the characters and their complications shining through her writing and directing.

They say you can't go home again but from that pivotal arrival sequence at JFK, Farewell Amor's central trio get a rare chance to start all over and decide on new terms of engagement. The question is will they take it?

Wilfred Okiche is one of the most influential critics working in the African culture space. He has mentored young film critics at Talents Durban. He is a member of FIPRESCI and has participated in juries at the Berlinale and the Carthage film festival. He tweets from @drwill20.

