

REVIEW | Where The Heart Is

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Everyone likes the idea of home as a safe place, a comforting, anchoring soundness. But sometimes this safety lies not in the familiar but in the complex challenge of exploring new vistas, away from all that was previously held dear. Especially when home is that place that takes instead of gives.

The upbeat documentary, *Blind Ambition*, directed by the duo of Robert Coe and Warwick Ross challenges preconceived ideas of home while reinforcing them at the same time. For the Australian directing duo behind the film, both truths can be self-evident all at once.

Premiering at the Tribeca Festival in June where it won the documentary audience prize, *Blind Ambition* is the profile of four Zimbabwean men and their ambitious, history making journey to France to compete in the World Wine Blind Tasting Championships, billed as the Olympics of the wine world.

Zimbabwe is known for a couple of things; iconic water bodies, safari adventures . Fine dining is hardly one of them. But therein lies the appeal of this story. Four African men, daring to compete and perhaps triumph in spaces that were never meant for them in the first place. It is one that has been played out before in different facets of life, some more momentous than others. This journey, chronicled precisely and with the appropriate dose of emotional impact by Coe and Ross, is worthwhile on its own. But what makes *Blind Ambition* more resonant is the back stories of all four men and their connection to Zimbabwe, a country they haven't called home for years but continue to carry with them wherever they find themselves.

The protagonists of *Blind Ambition*, Joseph, Tinashe, Marlvín and Pardon are just four of the numerous people who have fled the economic desolation of Zimbabwe, sparked during the tyranny of the Robert Mugabe years and persisting through a hard-fought democracy. Their individual stories are different, but they share a common thread. They all cross over to South Africa to start life anew.

While South Africa presents its own unique challenges, most disturbing of which is the propensity to spontaneously erupt in bouts of violent xenophobic attacks, the rainbow nation welcomes them and delivers opportunities not just to survive, but also to thrive.

The foursome finds themselves working jobs in the hospitality industry. The relative stability and prosperity of life in South Africa sparks their interest in the intricacies of wine. They become sommeliers, bond and on the encouragement of a mentor, decide with the help of crowd sourced goodwill, to do what has never been done; fly Zimbabwe's flag at the tasting championships.

Home is where the heart is and even when these young men are away, each carrying conflicting feelings for the land of their birth, the burden of representation makes it an easy call deciding where to pledge allegiance. With no structures, no competition, and no precedent, they have the chance to build something from the scratch and to write Zimbabwe's name in gold should their audacious bet take off. They seize it, owning their nationhood with pride and passion. This is obvious in the way they wave the flag on arrival in France, the folk tunes they perform that speak of a longing, and the ways in which they carry the land with them from South Africa to Europe.

It is not lost on them or the audiences that will gravitate to *Blind Ambition's* inspirational rhetoric that an opportunity like this; to rub shoulders with the world of winery's elite or even to represent their country in good faith would never be possible back in Africa. At least one of these men had never even tasted wine before they left home. And a person fixated on daily survival is hardly going to bother about the unique pleasures, let alone tracing the origins of a bottle of wine.

And perhaps that is the tragedy of *Blind Ambition*, embedded deep within the film's often cloying feel good narrative. The devastating paucity of opportunity in Zimbabwe- and other African countries- that ensures that homegrown success stories like this one are always the exception and never the rule. The countless dreams that will never make it out of Zimbabwe, until the dreamers find any means of leaving home, sometimes at the risk of life and limb. Watch *Blind Ambition* and cheer for Joseph, Tinashe, Marlvin and Pardon, but say a prayer for those who will never get that privilege.

The non-conforming folks in the Harlem set portion of *The Legend of the Underground*, another Tribeca premiering documentary- now available on HBO Max- have been persecuted by their country, a situation no one should ever have to go through.

Paradoxically, they are also a privileged group.

Unable to exist in full expression of their gender and sexual identities back home in Nigeria- where same sex relations are criminalized- these men have found their way to the United States to take advantage of the asylum opportunity. In Harlem, they have established a new, chosen family dynamic for themselves and can bask in the freedom that America offers.

But leaving home is more complicated than taking a long-haul flight to JFK. In a memorable scene in this snappy, jubilant and often sobering film directed by Giselle Bailey and Nneka Onuora, a group of queer Nigerian men in New York debate the usefulness of engaging with home by participating in the documentary. One of the men opines that Nigeria is a lost cause and energies are best directed to making a new life in the present. Another grapples with his survivor's guilt. But for Michael, an activist and one of the film's lead subjects, it is far more complicated.

Even though he fled Nigeria in fear of his life, Michael has continued to work in service of the queer community. Keeping tabs with Nigeria, he is inspired and fascinated by the flurry of activity in the local underground space. From where he is standing, Nigerian pop culture feels driven by doses of

queer energy and Michael feels like he needs to be where the action is, to understand the trends and the direction that change could be headed.

It's a tale as old as time, immigrants keeping a large part of their identity within and carrying it with them as they set up new roots. Even when this identity is rooted in trauma and injustice, it feels not unlike a betrayal, letting all or any of it go. And what happens when the new home is not yet willing to hold out a full embrace? Existence in a kind of middle space may be the only resort.

For the subjects in both *Blind Ambition* and *The Legend of the Underground*, engaging with home isn't just a choice they make, neither is it merely the flimsy case of savior's mentality that creeps up every so often. They can convince themselves they are holding on for their families, loved ones, and communities that have found ways of moving on in their absence. But it is pretty clear they are doing so primarily for the self. To piece together the several splintered fragments of themselves.

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