

## **The 17<sup>th</sup> Pan African Film Festival, Culver City, CA**

*By Gilbert Mulamba*

The Pan African Film Festival (PAFF) in its 17<sup>th</sup> edition is lead by its Executive Director Ayuko Babu, an International legal, cultural and political consultant specializing in African Affairs, who has worked for a variety of business and entertainment leaders including Stevie Wonder. Established in 1992, The Pan African Film Festival (PAFF) is a non-profit corporation dedicated to the promotion of cultural and racial tolerance and understanding through the exhibition of film, art and creative expression.

The Festival ran from the 6<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> of February and was hosted by Blair Underwood. It was held at the Culver theaters in the heart of Culver City under the sponsor of Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa.

This year saw about 150 films from all over the world: The Caribbean, Europe, Africa, South America, North America and even Australia. With over 2,500 submissions, the 2009 PAFF features films from 42 countries and boasts a record attendance now topping a quarter of a million attendees over its twelve-day run according to the PAFF organizers.

I missed the opening night with all the celebrity parade. *Jerusalema*, a film by South African Ralph Ziman was the first to be shown on the screens. The centerpiece of the festival was also a South African film, "SKIN" by Anthony Fabian and Starring Sophie Okonedo. *Relative Stranger* by Charles Burnett, featuring Eriq LaSalle, Michael Beach and Cicely Tyson was the closing night attraction.

Most films were screened twice or three times during the whole festival and opened to the general public. The theatres were open from noon to 10: 00 PM daily. The theater sold most tickets in the evening showings. The street children of Kinshasa which has been included in the Short Takes category was screened on the following days: February 12th at 6:15 PM, the 14th at 1:00 PM and on the 15th at 6:15PM.

I arrived in LA on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February and went straight to work. Meeting with the Festival staff, completing my registration process, watching other films and introducing myself to other film Makers, getting prepared as I could, with no media consultants or publicists...

My days were pretty much the same for the week that I spent in LA. Meetings, lunch with other directors, exchanging ideas, etc... we even had a brunch with the Director guild of America during which Tim Story, a Hollywood-film Director came to talk to all the directors present at the festival. I never expected that my documentary would reach a Festival such as the Prestigious PAFF.

Actually the film was screened along with another film, *4 Our Sons*, by Vanz Chapman and Eric McKay. I think that the Festival organizers paired them since both films examine the crisis affecting children. *4 Our Sons* featured young black man from different walks of life speaking on growing up in often hostile inner city environment and how they were able to build their own versions of the American dream. It was indeed a very interesting line up because after both films had screened, myself and the two other directors answered questions from the audience and we took turns in giving answers sometimes to the same questions. Both films deal with issues of opportunity for a better education for young children, but in two different contexts. Interestingly, there were quite a few films dealing with social justice issues.

This is a film that was never planned nor scripted. It was merely a response to an horrendous situation that I witnessed while on a family visit to Kinshasa. I decided then that I would not keep silent and that I had the responsibility to tell the world about the crisis affecting children. What is happening to these children is an extreme injustice. As you may have noticed the DRC story is not getting any media attention. As a Congolese, I feel that I have to be creative to bring this story to the limelight somehow. And I just found that the film format is the best tool for that purpose. The film format will open doors and put the story on different platforms to impact people. The bigger the platform, the more people are impacted. Awareness is the key.

For me this is just the beginning of a vast awareness campaign about the DRC children issues. As Dr. Maria Schmeeckle at Global Children Outreach put it, if we don't know about orphans and street children, we won't be motivated to reach out to them. This experience has convinced me to start planning for a next documentary film on some of the DRC issues. Earlier this week, I received a report from a US-Based NGO working in the DRC in conjunction with the social affairs ministry. This report gives a grim outlook of the current numbers of orphans in the DRC, and it is just unbelievable. I am not simply going to share numbers and facts; I need to make a second documentary. Period. This time it is going to be better planned, funded, etc... just need to do my homework in getting the proper partnerships and sponsorships.

The festival went very well. A favorite among PAFF jurors and audiences was the South Africa/UK film "Skin" starring Sophie Okonedo. Based on a true story. "Cuba: An African Odyssey" got an award for Best Documentary Feature, and the Bahamas' "Rain" was awarded the Best Director-First Feature. The thrilling, infuriating, and inspiring documentary by the Egyptian filmmaker Jihan El-Tahri, called *Cuba, the African Odyssey* begins with the story of Patrice Lumumba and the Congo. People who saw this film and then watched my documentary afterward were gratified with a lot of historical information on the Congo and they had a better understanding about the context of the current crisis affecting the children in the DRC.

At the end of the closing night I was left with a sense that the film wheel that I embarked on must continue to turn. A sense that more stories have to be told, more voices that would be otherwise ignored by the international community need to be heard. The feeling was really a sense of responsibility on my shoulders. The festival was an opportunity to create more awareness about the DRC issues and also an opportunity to network with other filmmakers. Although my film was not in the competition, its mere selection for the festival makes me believe that film is without doubt one of the best mediums to keep the DRC issues in the limelight. The response to the film was just awesome and humbling and I surely got a lot of questions from the audience during the Q&A following each screening. For a directorial debut with no previous background or experience in filmmaking, the comments from the audience and the Festival staff were just amazing to me. To them, the story of the children of Kinshasa was powerfully well told. Outside the theater, folks came to me with wanting to learn more, and suggesting that I send this film to entities such as National Geographic, etc...

Other than the fact the trip was costly and that Los Angeles weather did not seem to cooperate, this was a successful trip. The voice of the DRC abandoned children was heard at the festival. More needs to be done for the voices from orphans around the world to be heard.