

His House: The ghosts of an African civil war

Joanne Laurier
17 March 2021

Directed and written by Remi Weekes, from a story by Felicity Evans and Toby Venables

His House is the debut feature film of Remi Weekes, who also wrote the script from a story by Felicity Evans and Toby Venables.

The film, available at Netflix, dramatizes the situation of South Sudanese refugees trying to adjust to life in England, beset by the nightmare of their past experiences, cruel government policies and anti-immigrant backwardness. It is an unusual “horror” movie in that the frightening, fantastic goings-on are not occasioned by the presence of zombies, vampires or other creatures of the imagination, but result from the concrete, “real-life” conditions of asylum seekers, mass killings in Africa and the drownings of refugees.

His House opens in South Sudan, as Bol Majur (Djibril Diakhaté) and his wife Rial (Wunmi Mosaku) flee civil war with their young daughter Nyagak (Malaika Wakoli-Abigaba). Later, from an overcrowded boat crossing the English Channel between France and England, Nyagak and others are lost overboard in the stormy waters.

After spending months in a harsh detention center, where in one scene we see a guard brutalizing a detainee, Bol and Rial are provisionally released for six months. They are essentially on probation. A cold, officious social worker Mark (Matt Smith) lays down the law: “You will be given financial weekly support of 74 pounds [\$US103] in total. You do not have permission to work or to supplement your earnings by any other means.”

There’s a “final condition,” Mark goes on. “You will be sent to a home of our choosing. You must reside at this address. You must not move from this address. This is your home now.” The state demands that the couple be among “the good ones”—that they accept their treatment without complaint and do what they’re told.

Their new “home” is a run-down council house complete with peeling wallpaper and the rotting remains of someone’s pizza dinner.

Bol makes an effort. He insists on speaking English and using utensils, even trying to copy the way people dress (“We’re born again. Born again”), whereas Rial continues to wear colorful clothing and prefers to eat in a traditional manner (“All I can taste is metal”). On one of her first excursions, she gets lost in a maze of high walls and ends up being taunted by a group of teenage boys (“Go back to Africa. Only English around here, darlin”).

To a doctor, Rial explains the markings on her skin: “These I gave to myself with a knife. When I found my family butchered. There are two tribes where I’m from. They’re both killing each other. Depending on which one you belong to, you mark yourself. I marked myself with both. I survived by belonging nowhere.”

Far from offering Bol and Rial a place of rest and comfort, their new house soon torments them with strange and disturbing phenomena. A malevolent creature appears to be living inside the walls. Rial has a theory, the creature is an *apeth*, a “night witch.” The couple, she insists, needs to repay a debt.

It comes to light that Bol was guilty of a desperate and unconscionable act while escaping the civil war in Sudan. To survive the “horror” now requires drastic action.

“Your ghosts follow you. They never leave. They live with you.”

His House is effective, in a distinct and unusual fashion, at conveying elements of the refugees’ plight. These are ordinary human beings forced to flee dreadful circumstances caused in large measure by Great Power operations and machinations. As though they hadn’t been punished enough, once in their new country, the asylum seekers come up against inhospitable conditions and the whipping up of anti-

immigrant chauvinism. They are victims of one of the great social crimes of our time.

Director Weekes, aided by his cinematographer Jo Willems, captures the UK's reprehensible and indifferent bureaucracy, its animosity towards those who arrive penniless and shell-shocked after perilous, death-defying journeys. Attached to this state of affairs are detention camps and the constant threat of deportation. Actors Dirisù and Mosaku excel at portraying two people who bear the scars of this inhuman process. In one wrenching segment, a Sudanese mother and daughter are separated—the former screaming while the bus containing her kidnapped child drives off.

“[F]or many people who are moving or thinking of migrating to the UK, they're sold on the image that the UK sells to the rest of the world is a fairytale idea of England: it's the Queen and Charles Dickens and beautiful and London-centric,” commented Weekes in an interview with *Esquire*.

“And so for many people who arrive in the UK it can be very disorientating because what they see isn't what they were sold,” the writer-director added. Many refugees are transported to a detention center, Weekes further explained, “and then ferried to their new accommodation, and when they reach their new accommodation, they have no idea where they are. They have no sense of orientation. It adds to many people's sense of confusion and exacerbates the trauma they already have.”

Like the superlative and unnerving 2019 film *Atlantics* directed by Mati Diop, *His House* artistically commemorates the tens of thousands of people who have gone to watery graves escaping unbearable conditions in Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere. It is the refugee experience as a horror movie.

Africa's refugees, asylum seekers and internally displaced persons represent more than a quarter of the world's 71 million forcibly displaced people. The latter figure is the highest number since World War II, the result of armed conflicts, persecution and natural disasters.

“Oil-rich South Sudan,” the WSWS noted in April 2020, “which has suffered years of civil wars since declaring independence from Sudan in 2011, has about 1.6 million IDPs [internally displaced people], some living in densely packed tent camps inside UN

peacekeeping bases, with a further 2.2 million refugees in neighbouring countries. More than half the country's population faces acute food insecurity, while the leading causes of death are treatable diseases and conditions like malaria, tuberculosis and diarrhoea.”

Combine this reality with the rising death toll of the pandemic and a truly calamitous picture emerges. *His House* sensitizes the viewer to some of the social and emotional stress disorders arising from this immense suffering.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact