

This Is My Desire (Eyimofe): What everyone in Nigeria “goes through on a daily basis”

David Walsh
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This Is My Desire (Eyimofe), written by Chuko Esiri and directed by Esiri and his twin brother Arie, is a remarkable film about life in Lagos, Nigeria. It is opening in movie theaters in the US and Canada in July and August.

The Esiri brothers’ film takes place in two chapters, “Spain” and “Italy,” named for the destinations to which the film’s two central protagonists would like to emigrate. The work rings true in every important aspect.

In the first segment, the stronger of the two, Mofe (Jude Akuwudike) is an electrician working in a printing plant. It takes all his skill to keep a hopelessly jerry-rigged junction box—and, hence, the facility’s machinery—operating.

This Is My Desire is only minutes old when Mofe loses important family members to a disaster at home resulting from the generally wretched living conditions in Nigeria. Moreover, the costs of his proposed departure keep mounting. (He so wants to move to Spain that he has his name listed as “Sanchez” on a new passport.) His father, with the help of a lawyer, plays a dirty financial trick on him. In general, Mofe’s life is a series of blows.

He remains upright, however, and does not indulge in self-pity. How useful would that be? He goes on fixing everything for everyone, at work and then in the evening. Until finally, on the job, after a near-electrocution, Mofe takes out his rage and frustration on the junction box, leading to his being fired by a horrible female boss (“You’re going to have to pay for this!”), who has obstinately, deliberately refused to have the machinery repaired and made safe. It seems unlikely, for better or worse, that Mofe will be able to leave Lagos.

In “Italy,” Rosa (Temi Ami-Williams) works in both

a bar and a hair salon in an effort to make ends meet, but they do not. She also takes care of her teenage sister, Grace (Cynthia Ebijie), several months pregnant. Part of her plan to leave the country involves receiving payment from a “broker.” The latter makes Grace promise, “I swear I’ll give you my baby.”

The attractive Rosa has relationships that are loving or otherwise but inevitably driven in part by money problems, with her landlord, Mr. Vincent (Toyin Oshinaike), and a well-to-do American, Peter (Jacob Alexander). Things do not turn out well in this “chapter” either. As Rosa tells Peter, “People push people around in Lagos.”

And not only in Lagos—a city of some 15 million souls, which the Esiri brothers consider “a third character” in the script. The Lagos metropolitan area, estimated at 21 million, makes it the second largest in Africa, after Cairo. The city is one of the fastest-growing on the planet. It has specific characteristics, but it also has characteristics in common with São Paulo, Mexico City, Mumbai, Dhaka, Chongqing and, for that matter, New York and Los Angeles.

The Esiri brothers set out to make a film about the “haves and have-nots,” they explain, those who push and those who are pushed around.

Even leaving aside the deadly pandemic, what is the essential, most general reality for vast numbers of human beings at present, especially those living in teeming urban centers such as Lagos? A precarious existence, characterized by economic insecurity and relentless pressure of various kinds. To get through a single day unscathed, while remaining housed and fed, is a triumph for tens or perhaps hundreds of millions.

In an interview, Arie Esiri described Lagos as “a city of twenty million people with no organized public transport system and exceptionally bad traffic, very few

traffic lights at intersections and all these kinds of things. Uneven roads, inconsistent power and water supply.”

The script, he added, treats “what everyone in the country goes through on a daily basis, particularly the everyday person.” The story recounts “what the quotidian here in Lagos entails. And that lends itself to the way we shoot, which is very objective, almost like documentary style, as we are just trying to convey a truth about a situation.”

This Is My Desire is a work that addresses life in Lagos, directly, thoughtfully and artistically. Its tone is neither artificially “uplifting” nor cheaply, marketably bleak. More or less following Spinoza’s advice, it laughs, cries *and* tries to understand.

In an interview, Chuko Esiri commented, “I remember reading James Joyce’s book *Dubliners* ... Joyce said that he aimed to put up a well-polished looking glass into Dublin and the Irish people, and that for me was a moment that really crystallized what I was trying to do in the story, in the screenplay of this movie.” A thoroughly admirable and, under contemporary conditions, unusual ambition.

The screenwriter also referred to Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House*. Dickens, he explained, “did this thing where he made central locations [into] characters and tying people to those locations and that sort of led me to the idea of broadening the scope of the piece, which is really how Rosa ended up with her chapter.”

All in all, an auspicious feature film debut.



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