

african film review

# A Standing Ovation for *Ni Sisi*

Reminding Kenyans how powerful we can be

By Mugambi Nthiga

*The premiere screening of Ni Sisi started over an hour late. Cheerful and red-faced, director Nick Reding explained that the final, cinema-compatible edit had been delivered only minutes before, and he hoped that it would all go well. The lights were dimmed and the opening credits began with no titles, and no dramatic introduction, just a montage of Kenyan landscapes, cities and people scored by our national anthem.*

Ninety minutes later, Mr. Reding and the cast and crew of *Ni Sisi* stood in the half-lit auditorium, taking in the applause of an appreciative audience for what was truly a delightful film.

*Ni Sisi* is based on a traveling street theatre show devised by the collective at the ever-inventive and relevant arts NGO S.A.F.E. Kenya. After the violence following the 2007 election, S.A.F.E.'s artists, most of whom were directly affected by the fighting, created a travelling street

theatre piece which later inspired this film. In fact, the film's most unique and compelling device is the seamless cuts between the stage version, shot and performed in the sunny outdoors before an enraptured street audience, and the actual film, which indulges us with the same verve and energy. Every so often, we're enjoying the action with an audience of chuckling children or bemused workmen. The more dramatic moments, however, are reserved for the intimacy of the camera, with the youthful, cast pulling off memorable performances with refreshing ease.

In a timely and powerful return to the screen, Joseph Babu Wairimu (Nairobi Half Life) plays Jabali, the charming young protagonist and narrator. He introduces us to his sleepy community in a nondescript peri-urban Kenyan village. There are no fences, the young people interact like they were siblings, and the three neighbourhood matriarchs — all from diverse ethnicities and religions — raise each other's children like they were their own. This colorful group of people eagerly awaits the arrival of their niece Roxana, who suffered through the violence of 2008 and recently lost her mother to suicide.

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Roxana, played to innocent perfection by Jacky Vike (who you may recall from her jarring appearance as a foul-

mouthed prostitute in Nairobi *Half Life*), quickly catches the lustful eye of shopkeeper Mzito (Peter King), who is also vying for the local MP seat in an upcoming election. With the help of his manipulative wife (Krysteen Savane), Mzito orchestrates a simple, and all-too-familiar plan: intimidate the competition, sow dissension among the formerly oblivious people, stir imaginary fears between them, bankroll a conflict, then stand back and let the community destroy itself. It's left to the younger, streetwise protagonists to turn things around. The story is familiar, almost predictable at first, but the events will unexpectedly turn, and then turn again in twists that don't spiral out of control thanks to Reding's watchful direction and storytelling.

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*Ni Sisi* opened a couple of weeks before March's general elections. At that precise moment we had become saturated by petition after petition for peace. But, like *Something Necessary* that premiered only weeks before, *Ni Sisi* is a valuable contribution to the artistic response to our darkest period since independence. This is an important film. It reminds us of the Kenyans we're capable of being. We could be the members of that amiable, nameless village, where we'd live in such effortless harmony that we wouldn't pay attention to our different accents, food, customs and religious routines. *Ni Sisi* also reminds us of the Kenyans we could choose to be regardless of our past sins. We could be those heroic protagonists, outing the corrupt, rallying the masses and addressing the disasters of 2008 head-on without resorting to blind optimism and piety. The film intimates that we are in fact those people — *Ni Sisi* is Kiswahili for "It is we." We desperately need that reminder.

*Ni Sisi* ended on such an optimistic, enthusiastic note that our ovation lasted almost through the credits. What followed as we walked out, and as the election drama played out in the weeks after, was the sinking feeling everyone has when an engaging film experience has come to an end. We wonder, "Why can't real life play out like

the movies?"

*Ni Sisi* is available on DVD via [www.safkenya.org](http://www.safkenya.org). It is written and directed by Nick Reding, based on the stage play *Ni Sisi* devised by SAFE Ghetto, SAFE Pwani, Nick Reding and Kamau Wa Ndung'u. Starring Joseph Babu Wairimu, Jackie Vike, Mercy Wanjiru, Ednah Daisy, Triza Musimbi and Peter King. Edited by Carole Gikandi Omollo. Cinematography by Joan Poggio.



## The S.A.F.E. Space

You may have seen S.A.F.E. (Sponsored Arts For Education) at work in a brief but memorable scene from the film *The Constant Gardener*. Tessa Quayle, played by Rachel Weisz, is being guided through the alleys of Kibera when she chances on a street theatre piece addressing HIV/AIDS. Director Fernando Meirelles was so taken by the skit that he included part of it in the film, and provided the full version as a DVD extra.

SAFE Kenya has since grown into three arms: SAFE Ghetto in Nairobi, SAFE Pwani in Mombasa and its newest baby SAFE Maa in Loita Hills. Nick Reding left the U.K. for Kenya to collaborate with Kenyan artists to provide world-class street theatre to communities, addressing delicate social issues like female circumcision, environmental degradation, HIV, and now, post-election violence. In addition to putting on street shows that have reached millions of Kenyans, they're making successful headway into filmmaking, their first feature being the award-winning film, *Ndoto Za Elibidi*. During its decade of work, the organization has attracted Kenyan and British trustees and high-profile patrons, including Sir Ian Holm, Alan Rickman and Mr. Bond himself, Daniel Craig.

For more on SAFE Kenya, go to [www.safkenya.org](http://www.safkenya.org).

**Mugambi** is an actor, writer and self-confessed film fiend. He has worked on stages and screens in New York City, Philadelphia and Kenya. He has been seen in the M-Net series *Changes*, the film *Nairobi Half Life*, and most recently on episodes of the *Buni Comedy Series* available on [www.Buni.tv](http://www.Buni.tv). Tweet him at @ItsMugambi, or Like him on [Facebook.com/MugambiNithiga](http://Facebook.com/MugambiNithiga)