



# TALIYA

AN  
ARNOLD MWANJILA  
FILM

- INTERNATIONAL PRESS KIT -

## FILM INFORMATION

<b>Title</b>	T A L I Y A
<b>Genre</b>	Dark Fantasy Drama
<b>Language</b>	Kiswahili
<b>Country of Production</b>	Kenya
<b>Writer   Director</b>	Arnold Mwanjila
<b>Producers</b>	Joe Gathogo, Arnold Mwanjila
<b>Cast</b>	Maina Olwenya, Mwajuma Belle, Brian Ogola, Joseph Omari, Caxton Osozie, Teresa Shikolio, Charbel Ngeti
<b>Production</b>	Media Hub Africa (K) Ltd
<b>Production Year</b>	2020
<b>Release Date</b>	February 2021
<b>Running Time</b>	118 minutes
<b>Aspect Ratio</b>	1.85:1
<b>Format</b>	4K   Dolby Atmos

## **HOW MUCH WOULD YOU PAY TO SEE A REAL LIVE MERMAID?**

### **LOGLINE**

BABU, a poor but ambitious fisherman, enslaves a mermaid-like water-spirit in order to exploit her otherworldliness as a grand money-making theatrical spectacle.

### **SYNOPSIS**

In an idyllic fishing village off the coast of Kenya, BABU, a poor but ambitious fisherman, ensnares TALIYA, a mermaid-like water spirit, in stolen nets. Unable to get his 'three wishes' (or is it five) as told in the village's stories of old, Babu decides to exploit Taliya as a grand magical theatrical exhibit instead. He employs the Village Storyteller to help sell his story to the masses, and soon comes to conflict with the Chief's Son and a White Missionary Priest, who wish to end his act. But Taliya herself just wants to go home and so must effect her own plan, using Babu's own MAL-FORMED eight-year-old son as a crucial part of her exit strategy.

## **DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT**

We are dreamers and storytellers.

We dream of good happy lives. We want to be successful, or, at least, appear successful because success results in, or is indication of, good happy lives. We want to be rich and famous. We want our stories to be grand.

We fail. And we blame others for our failures.

We succeed. Sometimes. Often at the expense of others.

So we dream up excuses for our own failures and invent stories to justify our ill-treatment of others in pursuit of success.

We diminish, demean, disparage and demonize others, turn them into monsters and villains in order to feel good about ourselves.

But maybe this is who we are, who we have been from the beginning of time: monsters calling others villains.

A proper African fable to me harks back to these primordial times. It questions our natures, suggests that maybe they are consequences of our creation, or of events that happened around that time.

T A L I Y A is an attempt to tell one such fable. One that speaks to these warring aspects within us; a morality tale that depicts these dualities without judgement (but with caution), that shows us as we truly are: needy, hopeful, dreamers who are equally greedy, selfish and ruthless in the pursuit of those dreams.

- Arnold MWANJILA

## **ABOUT THE DIRECTOR**

Arnold Mwanjila is a writer and director based in Nairobi, Kenya. He graduated from Columbia University in the City of New York with an undergraduate degree in Film Studies and Economics, and is also an alumnus of Mira Nair's Maisha Screenwriting Lab in Kenya.

He has worked in various capacities in the film and TV industries and in theatre, both in New York and in Nairobi, and has written and directed for various home-grown award-winning TV Shows, bagging a BEST DIRECTOR nomination at the 2017 RIVERWOOD ACADEMY AWARDS for the sitcom, *AUNTIE BOSS*.

He has served as Creator/ Showrunner on ***WALIOBAKI (The Bereaved)***, a family sitcom about two women and their respective children who discover each other on the day that their secretive husband and father dies and leaves them nothing else but one house to share.

*Waliobaki* received 2 Nominations at the 2017 KALASHA FILM & TV AWARDS for Best Comedy and Best Performance in a Comedy for one of the three kids on the show.

Arnold is also the Writer & Director of 3 60-min TV movies commissioned by MNET for their East Africa Channel, Maisha Magic East.

***AISHA***, the first of these, about a young teenage girl who is forced to marry her rapist, was nominated in 7 categories at the 2017 KALASHA AWARDS as well, including BEST FILM, BEST ORIGINAL SCREENPLAY, and BEST DIRECTOR, showcasing his versatility as a Director of both comedy and drama.

***TALIYA***, a dark fantasy drama, is his debut feature film.

## INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

### What was your inspiration for *TALIYA*? Where did it come from?

It is difficult to pin-point an exact moment in time when the idea for *Taliya* was born. There have been several influences, both internally and externally. I have been surrounded by story all my life. Some of my earliest memories are actually stories I read or had been told, so I knew, from a very young age, that I was going to tell stories. I knew I was going to write.

I went to college to study economics so that I could earn a living doing economics or something, and then spend those earnings on living experiences that would fuel my writing **hobby**. That was the plan. I hadn't really considered a career in the arts. It wasn't even a thought. I was brought up, like most members of my generation in Kenya, to think of standard professional jobs – doctor, lawyer, accountant – as career-worthy. Pursuing economics was rebellious in its own way!

And suddenly I find that I have meandered away from the question somewhat. But therein lies the joy of Story!

Anyway, in college I took an introduction to film class. On a whim. And I was home. There was nothing else I was going to do now. Nothing else I could do. And then a funny thing happened; I realized just how much studying of film I had done prior to that class. I grew up very close to a remarkable video rental store whose owner was more than happy to steeply discount my rental fees out of our joint love for films. So I had watched a lot! A lot! So much so that I would, over several lunchtime breaks, narrate entire films to my friends in school who had less access to them than I did, channelling my ancestors in this way, playing the Village Storyteller to my schoolmates and keeping alive our Oral Narrative tradition.

Another magical thing happened in this film class, and this, I suppose, is a thing that happens to all of us: when one opens one's mind to a new possible reality, things start converging around that possibility. So it was with me in that class. I opened my mind to a new possible reality, to a new future as a filmmaker and suddenly, where there had been none, now there were hundreds of future film ideas.

I think *Taliya* was one of those early ones, probably influenced by Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*, which was released in that year, 2006, and which stunned me to the core of my being.

But the idea has been refined since, shaped by my own journey back home, given form particularly by my first visit to my parent's home in Malindi, at the Coast of Kenya, said Coast being where *Taliya* is set. We were reacquainting ourselves – parents and last-born child – and I rediscovered my mother's strong sense of the supernatural. She was convinced that her next-door neighbour had married a djinn. We argued, of course. I, for practical reason and science, she for magic. And she won. But only because I met her neighbour's wife soon after that and was completely enchanted by her, despite the fact that she was Mswahili and was covered head to foot in a hijab. Her hazel-green eyes, I will confess here, were bewitching.

But that's a story for another day.

Suffice it to say, that experience set me off proper towards the making of this movie - a journey that has taken close to ten years to fulfil, during which time my experiences in the

Kenyan Film Industry, and in my country and continent at large – joys and frustrations all – have embedded themselves into my psyche and, consequently, into this movie.

Whew!

That's long! Not entirely sure if this long-winded personal origin story is sufficient answer. Apparently even this simple question requires myth-telling. But some questions only have answers in story form. A lot of questions, actually. Important questions. Philosophical existential ethical questions. I think. My desire is for *Taliya* to entertain us by raising some of these universal questions, which, hopefully, concern us all.

### **The film has two stories tracking in tandem. What are these stories and why tell them in the way that you do?**

Two stories are told in parallel within the film.

The first is the one we follow visually – Babu's encounter with, and subsequent enslavement of, a water spirit.

The second, about the origin of our world and the place of water spirits in it, is told to Babu's son by his caretaker, Mama Pendo, and to various audiences by our Village Storyteller, Chiriku.

This narrative style felt important for two reasons.

One, context: the two stories contrast and complement each other, enriching each other and expanding the world beyond the 2 hours or so of the film, giving a profound history to the comings and goings of our characters, and alluding to an enduring future of these people and the place in which they live, which in turn adds (historic and futuristic) weight to the significance of our characters' present-day actions.

Two, it is a physical representation of our oral traditional style of storytelling & entertainment on which the movie itself is modelled.

I am very concerned with what I like to call our erased history, and this is basically everything that we (Kenyans, Africans) were before colonialism. Our national histories are new things and still very much tied to the colonizers that wrote them into being. But who were we before? What were we?

For me, calling back the oral narrative tradition is to invoke the spirits of those forgotten ancestors. It is an attempt to find a style or language that will accommodate their contributions to storytelling. This will probably be a life-long pre-occupation.

### **This film was entirely self-funded. How much did it cost to make?**

*TALIYA* is an ultra-low budget feature film with a production cost of around 15,000 USD, BUT with a production value FAR MUCH MORE THAN THAT. I would even hazard that the production value is on par with standard international indie pictures. I am biased, of course, but allow me to be super impressed and incredibly proud of the work that my team has achieved here.

I have worked with most members of the crew on several projects, and they have been punching waaaaay above their weight for quite some time. Our most notable collaboration, and one which convinced us to do a feature film, was on three 60-minute TV movies that we were commissioned to do in 2017, and which we undertook and completed back-to-back in under 25 days!

The budget given for each movie was a miserable 6000 USD but we ended up with nine nominations (including one for BEST FILM) at the 2017 KALASHA FILM & TV AWARDS, the second most in that year. We eventually bagged TWO awards – for Production Design and Lighting – but the big winner of the night was a movie made as part of a ‘training module’ run by a non-profit international organization from Germany, with prominent foreign crew members acting as mentors to local Kenyan filmmakers. The fifth such movie in about as many years. The reported budget, while still a low-budget 500,000 USD, was *still* 83 times the size of our own. This is what I mean by punching way above their weight.

These crew members have since forged their own successful paths in the industry and are now some of the most sought-after practitioners in Kenya. This also explains the high production level, but should, in no way, diminish their hard work. They have been responsible for the honing of their own skills.

The cast that joined us on this project are also some of the most sought-after actors we have in Kenya, and I think my crew was a huge draw for them, as was a script that wasn’t the usual cookie-cutter ‘Hollywood-like’ (and Hollywood-lite) affair. An ever-increasing sticking point for me.

We are still a colonized continent in a way, which is why the character of Father John was an important addition to the story. We are still under the delusion that Western ideals of government, business, religion, family, education, art, everything, are the best. We forget that what may work for them might not work for us. So we mimic Hollywood and Europe, and often, the only pay check guaranteed is on projects by foreign organizations and non-profits, with their own very specific very foreign agenda.

As filmmakers, we wanted none of that. We were determined to try our own way first, and to fail on our own laurels if fail we must. Which is why this film is entirely a film made by Kenyans for Kenyans. But it is also intended for a global audience. We believe we have an equal right to a voice on the global stage.

Hopefully, this is the start of a glorious post neo-colonial cinema, one which can stand and hold its own with the other glorious cinematic traditions across the globe.

### **Were you visited by djinns and spirits on your set?**

Funny you should ask that! I am not entirely sure if we were, or if our production woes were just the regular woes that happen and have happened and will happen on every single production on the planet.

The usual examples (all of which happened): a failing camera, a power outage, an actor missing his travel window, a location falling through, a crucial prop getting damaged before its use, etc

The not so usual example (and one which gives us pause): an inner wall collapsing with no warning, nearly killing our Make Up Artist and one of our leads, missing a fatal blow by the width of a strand of hair, and yet still causing serious damage to the lead's foot as to limit her range of performance.

If I were a violent vindictive water spirit, I would definitely want to attack the person who is said to represent me. I would also attack the person most responsible for the lead actor's transformation into a djinn. I would also strike at feet – reprehensible to me, and disrespectful of my majestic tail fin.

So, short answer: I don't know. Maybe?

### **Tell us a little about the characters in the film and what they represent?**

It's interesting that you phrase the question like that: 'What they represent.' Interesting because fables are allegorical, which means they are symbolic, built almost from the ground up with symbols.

I am not the biggest fan of symbolism. I feel like any reference outside the story takes away the magic of the story itself. That being said, is it even possible to get away from symbols? Everything references something else in one way or another anyway, no?

AND, I may not be a fan of symbolism, but this is a fable.

So...

**BABU**, whose name is the Swahili word for Grandfather, is our protagonist. He is the grandfather of our tale. The widowed king of his house. But he is, in reality, a poor fisherman – poor in skill and therefore poor in wealth. This space between his own reality and the fantasy in his head is the setting of our story. Like all men, his ambition is to make his fantasy real. Like a lot of men, he might not care too much (or at all) about whom he hurts along the way. His son's mal-formed frame is the needle that keeps pricking at his ballooning fantasy.

**TALIYA** in Arabic/ Swahili means young girl. This is who she is: a child brought forth into our world, birthed into slavery as it were. Innocent, confused and afraid, at first, she makes a quick study of human beings, and applies that knowledge back.

**CHIRIKU** is a noisy finch. A chatterbox. Chiriku, as the Village Storyteller, relies on his gift of the gab to eat. He is the jester at the court of kings. He is ambitious as well and would love more money and a grander stage than the makeshift one he has at the market centre. But he is also sensitive to the pain of others, having already endured so much because of his condition. Albinism, in this superstitious land, is of the 'devil' and must be rooted out, or nipped at the bud.

**MZEE SANTI** is Santiago, the Old Man by the Sea. (Here is symbolic overdrive. I couldn't help it.... Sigh!). This is a man suffering from a deep loss of manhood. Both literally and figuratively. What wretched thing is left after such a loss? But here, with Taliya, is an opportunity for healing and restoration.

**JABARI** is Swahili/ Arabic for fearless, for rock-steady strength. For Jabari, our dauntless warrior, this is what it is all about. Strength. Hovering on the edges of the village and of this story, is a bloody guerrilla war waged between forces of the government and rebel forces.

Jabari means to make a name for himself in this war, just as his father did, fighting for the liberation of the country from colonial occupation.

**FATHER JOHN** is another shameless symbol. Of the white missionary priests. Of the first white settlers. The first to degrade and denigrate our traditions. The first to kill our gods and erase our histories. The name John isn't just a generic white name but is in fact the name of some of the earliest white missionaries to Kenya: Johannes Rebmann & John Ludwig Kraft. (From Germany too!!!)

**MAMA PENDO's** name literally translates to Mother of Love. This is what she gives to Obi. What no-one has ever given him. Love.

**OBI** is the Igbo name given to the central, most important building in the compound. It is the heart of the home. A neglected one in this story, but still very important, still very central. Obi, as a character, is similar to Taliya. Innocent and Naïve. But he is also resilient, having survived ridicule and spite all his life, the bulk of it coming from his own father.

**You've called *TALIYA* a morality tale. What moral agenda are you pushing with the film?**

None. I prefer films without judgement. I hope I have created one such film.

That said, there is a definite outlook conveyed in the picture: ambition can lead one down the slippery slope of cruelty.

There is also the notion of the despised 'Other' at play here. This notion grows out distorted and disfigured views of differences. It grows out of the falsehood of a separation of tribes. Humanity is one. If there is a moral agenda, then this is it.

**What do you hope your audience will get out of this?**

First, I hope they are entertained. In all the ways they like to get entertained when at the movies or when listening to and/ or watching an artistic/ narrative performance.

Second, I hope it gets them thinking.

Third, I hope it gets them talking. I hope it sparks stories and conversations. I hope those stories and conversations help 'keep the wolves and the blizzards' at bay, because in truth, the cold and the dark are inside with us already.

## **ABOUT THE PRODUCTION COMPANY**

### **Who we are**

Media Hub Africa Ltd is a production house founded in 2014 dedicated to the creation of original content by African producers for African markets.

### **Our Vision**

To be Kenya's premier producer of African media content.

### **Our Mission**

To make excellent, artful, thought provoking and emotionally fulfilling Film, TV, Theatrical Events and other media content for African audiences.

### **Our Values**

Media Hub Africa is governed by creativity, ambition, teamwork, trust and accountability.

## CREDITS

### CAST

Babu	MAINA OLWENYA
Taliya	MWAJUMA BELLE
Jabari	BRIAN OGOLA
Mzee Santi	JOSEPH OMARI
Chiriku	CAXTON OSOZI KICHAMU
Mama Pendo	TERESA OMINA SHIKOLIO
Father John	RICHARD ROLLIER
Obi	CHARBEL NGETI
Amina	GEORGIA LENNY

### CREW

Written & Directed by	ARNOLD MWANJILA
Producers	JOSEPH GATHOGO ARNOLD MWANJILA
Director of Photography	ERIC GICHANGA
Editor	RICKY MWAURA
Production Designer	KEVIN AMWOMA
Sound Design	BRIAN MUNENE
Make-up & SPFX	ANNEROSE WAMUYU SOLOMON WAMBUGU
Casting by	KIERAN RATANYA "POPO" JOSEPH GATHOGO
Unit Production Manager	TABITHA KONGOINE

## CONTACTS



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