

Frederike Migom about BINTI

“A sheet of paper that says you don’t exist.”

„There is no place to call home,” says Binti, the main character in Frederike Migom’s feature film debut. Binti and her father have no place to feel at home. Certainly not in the squat, from which they have to flee for the police, and not in Belgium, where they have been living for years without a residence permit. Even though on her YouTube vlog Binti has plenty of followers, officially - on paper - she doesn’t even exist.

Binti’s vlogs are fun intermezzos, offering the audience some extra room to breathe in a dynamic film, an explosion of energy and colours. Just like the title character, who, together with her father, seeks shelter in the house of Elias, a somewhat introverted boy of her age. From then on, a plan ripens in Binti’s head: if she can link her father to Elias’ mother, all their problems would be solved at once.

The film starts in a squat right in the city centre. An unknown, parallel world for most of us.

Frederike Migom: I’d prefer to call it ‘a communal house’. Many squats nowadays are well-organised. Like the one where we filmed, where a non-profit organisation was offering housing facilities to those who can’t afford a proper roof over their heads in an overcrowded and expensive city. Unfortunately, the building now has been claimed back by the owners, who are planning to fill it with offices or apartments.

Some people live there in constant fear.

Migom: Not only sans papiers do live there, not everyone was there illegally. In reality, police raids only seldom take place. Nevertheless inhabitants are constantly moving from one place to another because they cannot find a permanent home.

When Elias asks Binti’s father Jovial why he left Congo, he replies: „Sometimes you can only go away.” Sounds rather indifferent, doesn’t it?



Director Frederike Migom © Faye Wolfs

Migom: I deliberately didn’t want to specify his answer. I assume that everyone who is willing to endure those horrors, will have a good reason for it. I don’t want the audience to compare „he has the right to flee and he doesn’t.” I have no answer as to why so many people are fleeing, but I do know that there are plenty of reasons for people to pursue a better life elsewhere.

After their escape, Binti and Jovial end up in a completely different world with Elias and his mother Christine. She is a fashion designer, surrounded by colours and clothes.

Migom: The squat was a cosy and colourful place too, which was my deliberate choice. Houses are usually not the most rewarding film locations. But the overload of colours and attributes was fun. We even play around with those colours: Binti and Christine are always colourful. Elias and Jovial are more khaki or green... They refer to nature, while Binti and Christine have a more urban appeal.

Elias’ „Save the Okapi” club is a hopeless one-man battle to fight. Why okapis?

Migom: There is so much to tell about those animals. Their existence is





threatened by rebels, poachers, climatological and political factors. The story about how okapis came to Belgium, which is the central breeding ground for all okapis in captivity, refers to our colonial history and to Jovial's fate. These mysterious animals only live in the Ituri rainforest. Congo is therefore not only a distant and dangerous country, but also a beautiful place full of nature, culture, music... and okapis.

One of the movie's assets are Binti's vlog posts. They are super fun and look totally credible.

Migom: I watched a lot on YouTube and studied different styles, on which our own vlogs are based. We recorded them with an iPhone, directly on the spot. That was great fun.

Despite the serious theme, these vlogs contribute to the feel good tone of the film.

Migom: The film focuses primarily on people: who are they, what do they do? People with no official documents are often cheerful, warm personalities. And of course there is the music. I wanted a soundtrack that was 100% 2018, to which Congolese elements were added. Everything had to merge into one, exactly what Le Motel does, in one of his songs he uses samples of singing pygmies, who live in the Ituri rainforest, just like the okapis. As if it was destined to be! That was the sound pattern that I was looking for with BINTI.

The incredibly lively face of Bebel

Tshiani (Binti) and her boundless energy determine the rhythm of the film. How did you direct such a bulb of energy?

Migom: Bebel is like a bright ray of sunshine and therefore perfect for this role. She acts very intuitively, while Mo Bakker (Elias) plays more thoughtfully. Keeping Bebel's energy level under control was a challenge. Days were heavy, the young actors got tired, but then we went outside to shout and roar together, and that is how the energy came back.

Something is going on between those two actors. They totally shine on the screen.

Migom: I can't play the typical strict director. It always had to be as much fun as possible for the kids. I wanted us to enjoy ourselves and work together on something beautiful. If the atmosphere on the set sometimes became a bit tense, I dared to ask them to go the extra mile. If I needed them for the full 100%, they were there, especially for me. That was so nice! I think they felt a close involvement with our joint project. Bebel is very young and had - unlike Mo - no experience at all. But we always were able to drag each other through our most

difficult moments.

Also in real life Bebel and Baloji are father and daughter.

Migom: That was such a wonderful gift. We casted around 60 girls for the role and Bebel was the best. With the children I rehearsed for a few days: trying out scenes, capturing an atmosphere... Each director has his own method, but I find rehearsing very useful. I have a background in theatre and I like to do my improvising beforehand, so that you are well prepared when arriving on the set. With our budget, there was little room for improvisation.

All your characters are strong human beings.

Migom: I like strong characters, as long as they are not too perfect. Binti is the heroine, but she is also a girl of flesh and blood with her weak sides. Yet, in this film it is the kids who come up with solutions, while the parents keep muddling through.

BINTI was shot during a terribly hot summer. Did you suffer from the heat?

Migom: I wanted a summery, sunny film, but the gods took my prayer a





bit too literally. It was superhot, with a lot of sweating going on. We filmed scenes with 50 people in a small plane without air conditioning. The make-up artists worked overtime dabbing the sweat. There were dance scenes for which the children had to jump around in costumes at 35 °. To do 20 takes under such circumstances, you have to be brave. The production team went to buy ice creams for the extras.

How realistic is the procedure you describe in those closing scenes, that has to do with arrest, deportation...?

Migom: I did a lot of research because I absolutely wanted it to be correct. There is no standard procedure; there are too many legal administrative details and exceptions. The procedure as I show it is quite extreme, but perfectly possible. Everything that happens in the film has already happened in reality. Despite the cheerful, romantic tone, we did not want to undermine the seriousness of the case. In the course of this project many people have asked me to re-think that ending. They thought it didn't sound credible. But I was 100% convinced and didn't give in. Now I'm proud of that.



Binti makes an impressive final statement: „I do exist“, she says explicitly.

Migom: She addresses the audience directly through her vlog channel. Anyone can „be someone“ on YouTube. Even though there is a sheet of paper that says: you do not exist, or at least not in this country. There, Binti claims her place in our society, and she has the right to claim it.

–
Gert Hermans