

## ...A platform for inspiration, re-education and aesthetic awakening

By Tolulope Ajayi



*IREP can be many things -- a cultural mecca, a festive intellectual gathering, Pan-African networking hub, but at its core, it is a tribal fireplace at nightfall under the gaze of the stars. The place where we all come to trade real experiences, expressed as pictures, words and rich life-changing stories*



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IN 2011, long before the designation “storyteller” became a stylish sobriquet, IREP enjoined us to begin to tell self-defining African stories by chronicling what was remarkable about our times, spaces and lives. But I came on this pilgrimage with slow curiosity. I had just finished my first hiatus from a decade-plus career in Advertising, during which I became a TV director on MNET’s *Tinsel Season 2*. Also, documentaries in the corporate realm were not considered of high narrative importance, except perhaps to record the performative achievements of a corporate organisation or an indulgent visual biography of a client with means. So IREP 2011 became for me my foray into festival culture and an introduction to very potent concepts.

IREP was in its time quite organised so programmes held at the Terra Kulture in Victoria Island happened with unerring rhythm and punctuality. I was very surprised with the way creators were celebrated and, in some cases, venerated. This was quite a departure from the creative climate I emerged from where creatives had to perpetually pitch themselves as useful. I remember the effusiveness of Jahman Anikulapo’s introductions of guests and their litany of accomplishments. It set the stage for an enthusiastic reception of the films. But the truth remained that I still only had a penchant for fictional narrative, as I felt it was more fluid to temper as opposed to the strictures of transparency documentary narrative demanded.

That year, I saw *Beyond the Rainbow* by Jihan El Tahri, an incredibly intriguing and insightful presentation. It was a true political tale of comradeship turned sour between Thabo Mbeki and Jacob Zuma, constructed with actual interviews, exceptional visual storytelling and on-screen confessions of the two ANC leaders. The film exposed the complexities and compromises of governance in South Africa.

Therein lies the power of documentaries; they present a panoply of views, a deeper excavation of issues and when done skillfully, become a beguiling yet truthful visual narrative. My initial concern was to know the technique by which she bewitched these leaders of South Africa to knowingly unfurl their innermost biases under the glare of a camera. I bravely asked a couple of decoy questions and then about her secret technique. While I expected a serious academic response, Jihan's very open and impassioned responses went further in explaining the technique and thematic value of the film. This theme of lost brotherhood carried over into the director's idea of my 2015 film "*The Encounter*," a fictional short based on real-life characters from the Biafran War.

I wrapped that year's festival deeply enriched by the broad diversity of documentary films and collegial experiences with filmmakers and thus cemented an annual subscription to the intellectual delights IREP offered till date.

**EVERY** year since then has been a revelation and curation of perception-altering films. Notable are films like *Master of the Universe* by Marc Bauder, – a tale about disgraced German investment banker Rainer Voss. Framed with austere precision, it's narrated "matter-of-factly" by Rainer as he soullessly details his avaricious activities amid the debris of financial ruin. One can only wonder the result of achieving such a confessional from a similarly shamed captain of a Nigerian company. At the moment, we can only wonder.

I'm also especially fond of *Faaji Agba* by Remi Vaughan-Richards. It's in part documentation of a forgotten Yoruba musical genre and heart-warming documentary of aged musicians who come together to play one final gig in New York. The vintage melodies leapt off the screen rising above us to the open air of Freedom Park's amphitheatre. A memorable evening.

Last year, I facilitated Directing classes at IREP's training programme, coming full circle from initiate to teacher and got the opportunity to share my unique experiences across years of absorption and practice of craft. This for me encapsulates IREP's boundless influence as cultural lodestone. It's a platform for inspiration, re-education and aesthetic awakening.

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- *Ajayi is a Director and Brand Storyteller*

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