



**NFTS AT 50**

# The Last Tree

+ Q&A with director Shola Amoo

British writer-director Shola Amoo's second feature, *The Last Tree*, is a semi-autobiographical coming-of-age film set in the early 2000s. It centres on a young boy named Femi of Nigerian descent who's being fostered by a white parent, Mary (Denise Black), in Lincolnshire. As Amoo explains: 'The story starts when his biological mum (Gbemisola Ikumelo) picks him up, takes him to south London to live with her, and we follow his trials and tribulations as he tries to find his identity within a new culture in a multicultural London.'

'There are elements of the film taken from my life,' Amoo says of his connection to the narrative, which charts the journey of Femi into his teens. 'The rest is amalgamated with other experiences I've heard around foster care, and friends who've dealt with this idea of double-consciousness: being of one community and living within another. It's all woven together.' That sense of struggling with the values and culture of an unfamiliar community also extends to Femi's experiences of visiting Lagos, where his biological father lives.

Following a young black character in a rural, predominantly white region like Lincolnshire is something audiences aren't used to seeing in British cinema. Amoo is well aware of how his use of these environments upends what many viewers may be anticipating. 'That was a very important thing,' he says. 'It's a story that takes place across three distinct locations in three distinct times. They couldn't be more different from each other. In many ways, Lincolnshire feels a world away from Lagos. The notion of subverting expectations of a film with a 99% black cast, and a black lead, that takes place in these locations – that was really a key proposition at the start.'

For much of the film, Femi is played by the magnetic Sam Adewunmi, who was born and raised in London. For roughly the first half hour, and in some later scenes that jump back in time, a younger Femi is played by first-timer Tai Golding. Amoo says he was 'looking for someone who was expressive, where at the same time you could always engage with the concept of them having two layers: what's presented and what's underneath. They [both] had a look right between the eyes suggesting they'd seen things and had experiences.'

'Younger Femi didn't see a script,' he continues. 'With the young kids, it was important that we built the character with them, rather than try to restrict them with the script and bring them to a certain place. I come from a background of documentary, so I really wanted to be able to capture those moments in as raw and authentic way as possible.'

*The Last Tree* is more traditionally cinematic than Amoo's previous feature, *A Moving Image* (2016), a multimedia film concerning gentrification. But the director sees a shared spirit between the two: '*The Last Tree* is very much informed by *A Moving Image* in the sense of how free and loose the latter is. That's a film that mixes documentary and fiction and other mediums together. We're not doing that explicitly in *The Last Tree*, but I think the essence of *A Moving Image*, being a freewheeling following of characters, is definitely there. I shot [*The Last Tree*] like I shoot documentaries, in the sense that it's

still very much about the discovery. It's still about fluidity. It's about the stuff that isn't planned as much as the stuff that is planned.'

It's Amoo's second collaboration with cinematographer Stil Williams: 'Stil and I worked together on the short film *Dear Mr Shakespeare* (2016). We were really hyped with what we got out of that and felt we developed a way of working that was exciting visually and took cues from a lot of places. We wanted to amplify that in *The Last Tree*. It's a film that takes place in three distinct locations, so we were able to find a way to highlight those locations but also build a seamless bridge.

'One of the key things was the idea of a story that is 100% driven by a lead character's perspective. How to create that perspective visually required developing shots that meant we were always able to follow that character, feeling inside the character's head. The kind of lenses we would use in different spaces to communicate the freedom or the claustrophobic nature of the space, the difference between the vistas in Lincolnshire and the more claustrophobic urban environment in London. All of these things played into the way we were thinking about the perspective. And also, how to really make black skin pop in British cinema in a way we hadn't really seen.'

'Music is really useful in the film for highlighting that identity crisis,' Amoo continues. 'And the fact that with Femi, a young black teen in a predominantly black school, there is a notion of the music he should be listening to, but what he's listening to on his headphones is different to the music he's mentioning to his friends.'

'There was always a concept of wearing a mask to cover oneself, to protect oneself, and then we'd have the moments where you let that mask down. The Cure was a really great band to communicate that and worked with the idea of the character liking something that he perhaps shouldn't be supposed to like in the space that he's in. It's playing with the identity angle and it's playing with the preconceptions one might have about a young black teen at that time.'

**Josh Slater-Williams, [bfi.org.uk](http://bfi.org.uk), 11 September 2019**

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## THE LAST TREE

*Directed by:* Shola Amoo  
*©:* LT COMM, The British Film Institute  
*A Prodigal production:* Prodigal  
*In association with:* Hartley Media Limited, Privateer Pictures  
*Developed with the assistance of:* Creative England, The BFI, BBC Films  
*Developed through:* The iFeatures Initiative  
*Developed with the support of Creative England via:* BFI NET.WORK  
*Made with the support of:* BFI Film Fund  
*Presented by:* Great Point Media, BFI  
*Executive Producers:* Lizzie Francke, Jim Reeve, Robert Halmi  
*Produced by:* Lee Thomas, Myf Hopkins  
*Line Producer:* Jeremy Campbell  
*Production Co-ordinator:* Emma Clarke  
*Location Manager:* Mandy Edwards  
*Post-production Supervisor:* Jennifer Eriksson  
*1st Assistant Director:* Tom Allan  
*2nd Assistant Directors:* Sataish O'Shea-Ramdeholl  
*Script Supervisor:* Jodie Woodall  
*CASTING DIRECTORS:* Shaheen Baig, Aisha Bywaters  
*Written by:* Shola Amoo  
*Cinematographer:* Stil Williams  
*B Camera Operator:* Jon Muschamp  
*Steadicam Operators:* Abramo De Licio, Andrew Bainbridge  
*Gaffer:* Bryan Gavigan  
*VFX by:* Creativity Media  
*Editor:* Mdhamiri Á Nkemi  
*Production Designer:* Antonia Lowe  
*Art Director:* Lissa Lamona  
*Property Master:* Alan Crozier  
*Costume Designer:* Holly Smart  
*Lead Make-up Artist:* Maxine Crew  
*Make-up and Hair Designer:* Chloe Edwards  
*Music by:* Segun Akinola  
*Performed by:* The Chamber Orchestra of London  
*Solo Flute:* Michael Cox  
*Solo Clarinet:* Anna Hashimoto  
*Conductor and Orchestrator:* Alec Roberts  
*Sound Designer:* Alex Outhwaite  
*Supervising Sound Designer:* Richard Kondal  
*Production Sound Mixer:* Alex Ashcroft  
*Sound Re-recording Mixer:* Jamie Roden  
*Nigeria Consultant:* Yinka Edwards

## Cast

Sam Adewunmi (*Femi*)  
Gbemisola Ikumelo (*Yinka*)  
Denise Black (*Mary*)  
Tai Golding (*younger Femi*)  
Nicholas Pinnock (*Mr Williams*)  
Archie Shooter (*Nathan*)  
Zak Franklin (*Rick*)  
Jack Chadwick (*Steven*)  
Layo-Christina Akinlude (*Bimpe*)  
Shaqai White (*younger Dean*)  
Francesca Zoutewelle (*Miss Smith*)  
Rasaq Kukoyi (*Dean*)  
Jayden Jean-Paul-Denis (*Tayo*)  
Demmy Ladipo (*Mace*)  
Tuwaine Barrett (*Dwayne*)  
Peter Brookes (*Billy*)  
Ruthxjiah Bellenea (*Tope*)  
Kwame Reed (*Mace attacker 1*)  
John Akanmu (*Mace attacker 2*)  
Sofia Chilvers (*Shauna*)  
Yazzmin Newell (*Dionne*)  
Ameen Mustapha (*Ola*)  
Emmanuel Obadium (*houseboy*)  
Jennifer Osammor (*Folami*)  
Belinda Chiazor (*housegirl*)  
Kayode Freeman (*Babatunde*)  
Jamal Ibrahim (*Ade*)  
Olanrewaju Halimat Motunrayo (*Sade*)  
Chief Oyedemi Fashola Gboyega (*Awise of Mushin kingdom*)

UK 2019

99 mins

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## NFTS AT 50

### Saint Maud + Q&A with director Rose Glass

Thu 2 Sep 17:45

### The Last Tree + Q&A with director Shola Amoo

Sat 11 Sep 17:00

### Il Postino (The Postman) + Q&A with director Michael Radford

Sun 12 Sep 17:00

### An Evening with Roger and James Deakins

Sun 12 Sep 20:30

### Absolute Beginners + Q&A with director Julian Temple and cinematographer Oliver Stapleton BSC

Wed 15 Sep 20:25

### The Souvenir + Q&A with director Joanna Hogg

Fri 17 Sep 17:45

### The Selfish Giant + Q&A with director Clio Barnard

Mon 20 Sep 20:50

### Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit + Q&A with director Beeban Kidron

Thu 23 Sep 18:00

### Kurt & Courtney + Q&A with director Nick Broomfield

Sat 25 Sep 14:30

### Theatre Girls + Q&A with director Kim Longinotto

Sun 26 Sep 15:40

### Surge + Q&A with director Aneil Karia

Tue 28 Sep 17:40

### Of Time and the City + Q&A with director Terence Davies

Sat 2 Oct 14:15

### Rocks + Q&A with director Sarah Gavron

Sat 2 Oct 17:30



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