



NFTS AT 50

Rocks

+ Q&A with director Sarah Gavron

'Real queens fix each other's crowns' reads a sticker tacked to 16-year-old Shola's bedroom wall. Shola (Bukky Bakray), better known as Rocks, might be the best-loved member of her all-girl crew, which includes her best friend Sumaya (Kosar Ali), but things are less stable at home. When her mother suddenly runs out on her, Rocks must assume responsibility for her younger brother Emmanuel (D'angelou Osei Kissiedu). She must also keep going to school, keep on top of the dramas of being in Year 11, and keep out of the way of neighbours for fear social services will discover her situation.

With its garrulous, multiracial cast made up of schoolgirls from the East London borough of Hackney, *Rocks* might draw comparisons with a film such as Céline Sciamma's 2014 drama *Girlhood*, which spent time with a girl gang of Afro-French teenagers living in a Paris *banlieue*. Yet its perspective feels more in keeping with the tradition of British dramas about working-class communities told – and often written – from a youthful point of view. *Rocks* joins a lineage that runs from such classic post-war social-realist entries as Tony Richardson's *A Taste of Honey* (1961) and John Schlesinger's *Billy Liar* (1963) through to Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher* (1999), Shane Meadows's *This Is England* (2006) and Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* (2009), but there's also a very fresh energy and audacity to the storytelling. Though its title suggests something rough, the film sparkles with life, less immovable grey stone than uncut gem.

This vibrancy owes much to how the film was conceived, developed and produced. Creating a conscious environment of non-hierarchical collaboration, its team were motivated by a desire to make something authentic and informed by the voices of its subjects.

I sat down with some of the film's key players, including lead actors Bukky Bakray and Kosar Ali, writers Theresa Ikoko and Claire Wilson, director Sarah Gavron and associate director Anuradha Henriques, to talk through a new way of working.

'Sarah Gavron and [producer] Faye Ward said they wanted to make a film about girls in London. I'm a girl from London, I wrote a play called *Girls*, so I feel they just googled "Girls in London" and I popped up,' says Ikoko, smiling. The room erupts with laughter. The award-winning Nigerian-British playwright is describing how she connected with Gavron, Wilson, Ward and casting director Lucy Pardee. 'We weren't quite sure what we wanted it to be but we knew we wanted to work in a different way,' she adds.

Gavron and Ward pitched for seed development money from Film4 and the BFI to do the research needed to work out what the film would be. With additional support from the Wellcome Trust, they eventually decided to focus on girls in Year 9 and work with them over a sustained period. Pardee, a frequent collaborator of Andrea Arnold, and her casting associate Jessica Straker spent several months in schools and youth clubs across Hackney, eventually forming their own workshops and whittling down 1,300 girls to approximately 60.

Ikoko recalls friendships forming in the group, hinting at the bond that was blossoming between Bakray and Ali. Rocks is the group's natural leader and its solid, stoic centre of gravity. The prankish Sumaya, a gangly head-scarfed motormouth with an acid tongue, is her light-hearted foil. As a double-act, they have electric chemistry, bonding over their shared experiences as the daughters of Nigerian and Somali immigrants respectively. Bakray is 17 years old; Ali a year younger. The pair were just 14 and 13 when they began the process.

The workshops, which ran for a year before Ikoko and Wilson's script was written, involved improvisation, collaboration and 'fun activities' designed to provide a productive but low-stakes playground. Since making the film, Bakray has joined Rada's Youth Company. Ali has ambitions to write and direct.

When asked how they built their obvious rapport, the girls eye each other. 'Real recognise real, to be honest,' says Bakray. 'It's really hard because when young people meet other people, it's like...' 'Awkward,' interjects Ali. 'It's awkward,' Bakray agrees. 'You're always guarded because you want to protect yourself and you don't want anyone to judge you, but the first day I met Kosar, it was like I was speaking to a long-term friend. We were literally giving other people the side eye.'

To put it another way, the girls were of the same spirit. Wilson describes this spirit, and that of the film, as 'truthful and honest about friendship and girls', and animated by 'joy that wasn't being wrenched in a way that was manipulative'. The film hints at the brutality of the care system and the austerity measures that have affected young people in urban areas, but any institutional critique feels secondary to its giddy teenage lifeforce. When writing the script, she and Ikoko sought to reflect 'the amazing amount of joy that we felt in the young women we met but also in the relationships with each other'.

With their cast in place, the team developed a story Ikoko had written as a love letter to her older sister, based on her own experiences of growing up on a council estate in Hackney. 'When I see my community reflected on TV, I don't see the love or the joy that I knew', Ikoko explains. 'When we shared baths, we had water fights. When we shared beds, we would save all of our stories for bedtime so we could talk about it. My sister did a lot in order to give me a childhood, in order to give me joy. I think joy is the language of our people.'

Rocks, as its title suggests, tells a story about resilience and the way young Black women are often hardened by both circumstance and society, and forced to grow up before their years. Yet, beneath their tough exteriors, as Ikoko puts it, there exist 'wells of joy and love and compassion'. The film is adamant in expressing Rocks's capacity for joy despite the trauma she experiences, excavating her reserves of tenderness and humour. We see it in the way she cares for younger brother Emmanuel, in a dance lesson at school, and in the spontaneous, quickfire classroom banter between her and the other girls.

It's also the guiding principle behind one of the film's funniest and most anarchic moments – an impromptu food fight. Bakray and Ali snigger at its mere mention, remembering how Bakray went off-piste during filming, showcasing a gift for comic improvisation. 'Did you do what you were supposed to do?' Ikoko asks her. 'No,' she replies sheepishly.

Associate director Henriques emphasises that this atmosphere of warmth and flexibility wouldn't have been possible to build without time. 'We had a long period getting to know each other, and if you tried to rush that we wouldn't have gotten to a place of trust and openness by the time we started shooting,' she says. That trust was helped by the fact that many of the film's key collaborators had experience in community and youth work.

Among the crew, 75 per cent of whom were female, were a mix of ages and experience levels. Still, Wilson insists that they were all on the same page. 'It made sense to "cast" the crew, and find a crew who fitted the story,' Gavron says. This included hair and make-up designer Nora Robertson, who is from Ghana and specialises in Black hair; and director of photography H el ene Louvart, the DP on *Happy as Lazzaro* (2018) and *Beach Rats* (2017), who presided over a female camera crew.

Many of the girls didn't have experience of being on a film set – it was Gavron's hope that being surrounded by female collaborators would put them at ease. The rawness of Bakray's performance as a vulnerable young woman who has learned to manage her emotions, even in moments of crisis, feels like a vindication of this decision to create a safe environment. It was by design that the film's young subjects would be given both the opportunity and the resources to tell their own story, on their own terms. To do this, the team would need to do away with hierarchy and so it was established from the beginning of the project that there would be no conventional chain of command. 'It's a utopia, because adults are listening to you,' Ali says of their set's collapsed power dynamic.

Instead of the usual setup, the filmmaking would be organised around the idea of reciprocity, and the girls' individual ideas considered with seriousness. Henriques describes 'a shared value system' led by the voices of Black and Brown women telling stories as an antidote to traditional, top-down filmmaking. 'For me, as a younger filmmaker, that's one of the things I can't compromise on now,' she says. This model isn't a kind of feminist utopia – it's a necessity.

Interviews by Simran Hans, bfi.org.uk, 14 September 2020

Losing Touch

When Tessa's English father leaves his Italian wife and family stranded, each member of the family responds to the crisis in their own (very) peculiar way...

ROCKS

Director: Sarah Gavron
a Fable Pictures production
Presented by: Film4, BFI
In association with: Head Gear Films, Metrol Technology, Kreo Films, Altitude Film Entertainment, Wellcome
International Sales: Altitude Films Limited
Executive Producers: Natascha Wharton, Julia Oh, Daniel Battsek, Susie Bruce-Smith, Emma Duffy, Will Clarke, Andy Mayson, Mike Runagall, Phil Hunt, Compton Ross, Sarah Gavron, Hannah Farrell
Produced by: Ameenah Ayub
Producer: Faye Ward
Written by: Theresa Ikoko, Claire Wilson
Story by: Theresa Ikoko
Director of Photography: H  l  ne Louvart
Editor: Maya Maffioli
Production Designer: Alice Normington
Costume Designer: Ruka Johnson
Original Music: Emilie Levienaise-Farrouch

Cast

Bukky Bakray (*Shola, 'Rocks'*)
Kosar Ali (*Sumaya*)
Shaneigha Greyson (*Rosh  *)
D'Angelou Osei Kissiedu (*Emmanuel*)
Ruby Stokes (*Agnes*)
Tawheda Begum (*Khadijah*)
Anastasia Dymitrow (*Sabina*)
Afi Okaidja (*Yawa*)
Sarah Niles (*Ms Booker*)

UK 2019
93 mins

LOSING TOUCH

Director: Sarah Gavron
Production Company: National Film and Television School
Producer: Jonny Persey
Screenplay: Antonia Baldo
Director of Photography: David Katznelson
Editor: Riaz Meer
Designer: Jane Harwood
Music: Tara Cr  me
Sound: Maj-Lin Preiss

Cast

Suzanna Hamilton (*mother*)
Joanna Barrat-Constantinou (*Tessa*)
Gemma Bland (*Nella*)
Elena Cotton (*grandmother*)
Carlo Alighiero (*grandfather*)

UK 2000
28 mins

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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