



ART OF ACTION: CELEBRATING THE REAL ACTION STARS OF CINEMA

# The Woman King

## The Woman King

Directed by: Gina Prince-Bythewood  
©: Inc. TriStar Productions, eOne Features LLC, TSG Entertainment II LLC  
Production Companies: JuVee Productions, Welle Entertainment  
Presented by: eOne, TriStar Pictures, TSG Entertainment II  
South African Production Services: Known Associates Entertainment  
Executive Producer: Peter McAleese  
Produced by: Cathy Schulman, Viola Davis, Julius Tennon, Maria Bello  
Unit Production Manager: Mayra Garcia  
1st Assistant Director: Dale Butler  
Script Supervisor: Morag Cameron  
Casting by: Aisha Coley  
Screenplay by: Dana Stevens  
Story by: Maria Bello, Dana Stevens  
Director of Photography: Polly Morgan  
Visual Effects Supervisor: Sara Bennett  
Special Effects Supervisor: Cordell McQueen  
Edited by: Terilyn A. Shropshire  
Production Designer: Akin McKenzie  
Supervising Art Director: Christophe Dalberg  
Set Decorator: Birrie Le Roux  
Costume Designer: Gersha Phillips  
Music by: Terence Blanchard  
Sound Designer: Jay Wilkinson  
Production [Sound] Mixer: Derek Mansvelt  
Re-recording Mixers: Kevin O'Connell, Tony Lamberti  
Supervising Sound Editor: Becky Sullivan  
Sound Effects Editor: Hector Gika  
Stunt Coordinator/Fight Coordinator: Daniel Hernandez  
Stunt Co-ordinator: Grant Powell  
Fight Coordinators: Johnny Gao, Filip Ciprian Florian, Stuart Jacob Williamson  
Cast:  
Viola Davis (*Nanisca*)  
Thuso Mbedu (*Nawi*)  
Lashana Lynch (*Izogje*)  
Sheila Atim (*Amenza*)  
Hero Fiennes Tiffin (*Santo Ferreira*)  
John Boyega (*King Ghezo*)  
Jayme Lawson (*Shante*)  
Adrienne Warren (*Ode*)  
Masali Baduza (*Fumbe*)  
Jordan Bolger (*Malik Diallo*)  
Jimmy Odukoya (*Oba Ade*)  
USA/Canada 2022  
135 mins  
Digital 4K

+ intro by Rógan Graham, freelance writer and film programmer  
(Friday 1 November only)

Viola Davis is magnificent as General Nanisca, leader of the Agoji, the all-female army responsible for protecting the African Kingdom of Dahomey in the 1820s. With the increasing threat of slave traders, their importance becomes vital. Gina Prince-Bythewood balances powerhouse performances with stunning fight sequences as she revitalises the historical epic, weaving into it the passion and rich layers of emotion that are integral to all her work.

Kimberley Sheehan, [bfi.org.uk](http://bfi.org.uk)

There is a paradox in the kenning-like title of this latest feature from director Gina Prince-Bythewood (*Love & Basketball*, 2000; *The Secret Life of Bees*, 2008; *The Old Guard*, 2020). A 'woman king' is surely a queen – but unlike Shante (Jayme Lawson), the chief consort to King Ghezo (John Boyega) and a woman who very much desires the luxurious, sheltered life of a conventional queen, the Agojie, a group whose very name means 'king's wives', in no way conform to the expectations of their gender: they are the king's female guard, preferring the hardship and discipline of a warrior's life to the sex, marriage, baby-making and domestic servitude that would otherwise be their lot. 'Woman King', it will emerge, is a near-mythical status conferred upon a woman whom the king regards as his equal in counsel and vision. Equality, however, is an elusive idea here, under constant negotiation.

There are other contradictions. For while *The Woman King* is set in a particular time and place – the West African Kingdom of Dahomey in 1823 – and while Ghezo was an actual king and the Agojie were an actual fighting force under him, other characters are more nebulous. The middle-aged Agojie general Nanisca (Viola Davis) is named after a real person, except that that person joined the 'Dahomey Amazons' as a teenager over half a century later, in 1889. Similarly, Nawi (Thuso Mbedu), the 19-year-old recruited to the Agojie after violently rejecting the older man her family has chosen to be her husband, is named after an actual woman said to have been the last surviving Agojie, who claimed to have fought as a teenager in the Second Franco-Dahomean War in 1892 (some 70 years after the film's events), and who lived till 1979!

So Dana Stevens' screenplay (from a story she wrote with Maria Bello) plays fast and loose with historical chronology, while even the recorded names Nanisca and Nawi are Anglicised versions, with no close equivalent in the local Fon language. Other characters, like Nanisca's tough lieutenants Amenza (Sheila Atim) and Izogje (Lashana Lynch), or the Portuguese-Brazilian slaver Santo Ferreira (Hero Fiennes Tiffin) and his half-Dahomean companion Malik (Jordan Bolger), are fictions (although Ghezo did have close relations with the Brazilian slave trader Francisco Félix de Sousa). Even as the film concedes from the outset the uncomfortable truth that the real Dahomey under Ghezo was no less actively involved in slave-trading than its enemy the Oyo Empire, it

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Sat 16 Nov 11:00

### The Stunt Man

Sat 16 Nov 17:50

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## Woman Kings

### The Woman King

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### Cofy

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### Polite Society + Q&A with director Nida Manzoor

Sun 17 Nov 18:00

### The Long Kiss Goodnight

Fri 22 Nov 20:35

### Yes, Madam! Huang jia shi jie

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### Executioners Yin doi hou hap zyun

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also implies that by the film's end, such practices, at Nanisca's urging, would soon be replaced with palm oil production – whereas in reality, Ghezo was still selling into slavery both captives from raids (often conducted by the Agojie) and even Dahomey's own citizens till the end of his reign three decades later. Let's not even mention the mass human sacrifices carried out annually in the Kingdom – after all, the film does not mention them.

None of this really matters. For with its rape-revenge plotting (Nanisca's opposition to the Oyo general Oba Ade, played by Jimmy Odukoya, is deeply personal), its improbable reunion of a long-estranged mother and daughter, its emancipating romance and its exploits of derring-do, *The Woman King* keeps reminding us that it is a myth, and that its play on history is exaggerated and idealised. Indeed, its empowered women have not a little in common with the all-female militia (in fact modelled on the Agojie) in Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (2018) or the Amazon army in Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* (2017), making this a sort of superhero story *avant la lettre* set in an African past. Prince-Bythewood's film is not so much accurately recreating the past as allegorising a timeless struggle – for liberation, for equality and for progress – and it creatively engenders a brief moment when men and women, white and Black, find an agreeable accommodation with each other and together overcome oppression.

Certainly *The Woman King* is an adventure epic, full of vicious close-quarters battles and daring rescues, but it is also an exemplary intersectional feminist call to arms for the African sisterhood to keep building on the achievements of their female ancestors and to keep fighting – and dancing – as they did, or might have done, back in Dahomey, with or without the approval of their patriarch, in a film itself written, directed, shot and edited by an ensemble of women.

Anton Bitel, *Sight and Sound*, November 2022