

Guys:

I have selected these reviews mainly for what they tell us about the significance of the film in terms of an “African perspective” rather than their take on the quality of the film itself (in terms of the screenplay, acting, directing, editing, production values, and so on). As always, read, digest, and be prepared to be tested on this material.

I Dreamed of Africa
Review by David Sterritt
H-AfrLitCine (May, 2000)

'Africa' is anything but picture-perfect

Movies as different as *Out of Africa* and countless *Tarzan* epics demonstrate the perennial appeal that Africa holds for Western filmmakers. If you're going to tell a story with an African setting, though, it's best if you have meaningful ideas that help audiences understand the continent's multifaceted nature in new and useful ways. *I Dreamed of Africa* fails this test by using the landscapes and inhabitants of Kenya not as subjects of intrinsic interest, but merely as picturesque backdrops for the sort of photogenic white characters that Hollywood almost always turns its attention to.

Based on real events, the story centers on Kuki Gallmann, a European woman who moves from Venice to Kenya with her husband and young son, faces more harrowing challenges than she ever expected, and ultimately decides to spend the rest of her life there despite the daunting experiences it has heaped upon her. This is promising material, but the filmmakers focus so exclusively on their attractive heroine, played by Kim Basinger (see interview, page 19) with more commitment than credibility, that the story loses any real connection with Africa beyond its value as a beautiful background and a source of jolting plot twists.

Among many other questions, alert viewers may ask why so few black faces are visible in a region populated mainly by black people--and why they're shoved into the margins of the screen when they do appear, the better to enhance the picture-perfect features of Basinger and company.

Movie-goers looking for exotic scenery and a good cry may find the picture enjoyable. Others should wait for an African excursion that lives up to its title.

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I Dreamed of Africa
Review by Katrina Daly Thompson

By now images of Africa produced in the West should be quite familiar to us - an Africa that is savage and dangerous, but mysterious and beautiful. As an academic whose research focuses on African literatures and film, I am always leery when new versions of this fiction crop up. Because of my general distrust of Western depictions of Africa, I had low expectations of *I Dreamed of Africa*, especially when I learned that its director, Hugh Hudson, was also responsible for *Greystoke: the Legend of Tarzan* (1984). I would like to be able to say that with *I Dreamed of Africa* I was pleasantly surprised, but unfortunately this film was so pacific that surprise would be too strong a word. Happily there was nothing overtly offensive in the film's representation of Africa or Africans. But there was not much of interest in the film's use of Africa either, although you wouldn't know this from the actors' claims. In a making-of-the-film special aired on HBO, Kim Basinger touted the film as "the greatest experience I've ever had as an actress." "I took my own journey into Africa," she explained; "I walked away from Africa with so much respect." As such benevolently ethnocentric comments suggest, like many films of this genre, *I Dreamed of Africa* uses Africa only as a romantic fantasy backdrop for the film's European characters and Euro-American actors.

Adapted from Kuki Gallmann's autobiography by screenwriters Paula Milne and Susan Shilliday and produced by Stanley R. Jaffe and Allyn Stewart, *I Dreamed of Africa* follows Kuki (played by Kim Basinger) from Italy, where she is injured in a car accident within the first five minutes of the film, to Kenya, where she bravely withstands the loss of her husband and son to the unpredictable dangers of Africa. Despite that the film begins in Italy, the location remains un-

clear for most of the film, and never do we hear Italian being spoken. This is not surprising since three of the four main characters (Kuki, Emanuele, and Kuki's mother) are played by Americans (Basinger, Liam Aiken, and Eva Marie Saint, respectively); none of them even attempts an Italian accent. Perhaps relying on the audience's ability to suspend disbelief, the film strikes a precarious balance between spurious attempts at linguistic realism and almost complete omission of the cultural settings in which the story is meant to take place. In this respect, the most striking aspect of the film is its use of various languages and depictions of language learning.

Kuki, her husband Paolo (Vincent Perez), and their son Emanuele (Liam Aiken) leave Italy for Kenya - usually referred to simply as "Africa" - in search of a new life, one of excitement and mystery. As Kuki explains to us in a voiceover, "This is a chance to find meaning in my life, to give it value." As soon as the three arrive in Kenya - an arrival marked by an aerial view of a herd of elephants and by Basinger's hair changing from prim and straight to wild and wavy - Paolo begins to teach Emanuele Swahili (notably, all words for animals). Ndege means vulture in this film's idiolect. The scriptwriters were pretty close - the word actually means bird. The first thing Kuki does is introduce herself in Swahili to the two Kenyan servants who are already mysteriously waiting for her family at the abandoned farm that will become their home. "Mimi Kuki. Kijana wangu Emanuele," which would translate "Me Kuki. My young person Emanuele." Did Basinger take Swahili lessons from Tarzan himself? Without subtitles the non-Swahili speaking audience knows only from context and visual clues (Basinger pointing to herself, then to Liam) that she is greeting the servant. Presumably Kuki is meant to have been taught by Paolo, although the extent to which he knows the language is kept pretty well hidden. Children, as we know, learn languages more quickly than adults do. This holds true for Emanuele, who within a short time learns to speak Swahili in complete sentences; for these we get subtitles. Yet even Kuki, when she visits a local chief to ask him not to use the water on her land, greets him in Swahili and explains where she is from. Perhaps the audience is meant to be impressed, but Basinger's Swahili remains choppy, syllabic. At this point the film has done all it must to establish Kuki and Emanuele's Swahili skills. From here on Emanuele is not required to speak anything but English; Kuki is now addressed in fluent Swahili by her servants and we are led to believe she understands it. In reality her only response is "Asante," which means thank you.

The use of English and Italian in the film is equally implausible. When Kuki addresses the local chief in Swahili, he responds in perfect English, explaining that he was taught by European missionaries. Yet he seems shocked to see a European, a shock that does not correspond with the numbers of whites whom the film would have us believe are more numerous than Kenyans. Just as Kenya becomes "Africa", there is almost no recognition that Italy is not "Europe". Hence the use of English throughout the film among whites who look and sound like Britons, Americans, and South Africans even when they are meant to be Italian. Kuki does provide her servants with an Italian lesson, though. They learn to make and say fettuccine and when they succeed are praised with "Bravo!". In other words, only Italian that Americans can understand is used.

Like "Africa" itself, languages like Swahili and Italian are used in this film only for flavor. Just as the audience hears Swahili and is meant to think it accurate without really understanding it, they are meant to trust the film's image of Africa without understanding "Africa" for what it really is - Kuki's, Hugh Hudson's and several centuries of other Westerners' own construction.

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I Dreamed of Africa
Review by F. L. Carr

Back in Africa

Don't Europeans ever get tired of swooping down to Africa to exploit its peoples and natural resources? Apparently not. *I Dreamed of Africa* is based on the true story of Kuki Gallman (Kim Basinger), an upper-class, divorced Italian woman who falls in love with and marries the handsome adventurer Paolo Gallman (Vincent Perez). She then moves to Africa with her new husband and her seven-year-old son Emanuele (Liam Aiken) to seek a new life on a ranch in Kenya.

The movie hinges on this huge step, but never satisfactorily explains why Kuki finds it necessary to uproot her son and herself to go off with a man they barely know. The real Kuki probably had compelling reasons, but the screenplay, an adaptation of Gallman's autobiography by Paula Milne and Susan Shilliday, never illuminates them. For example, regarding why she moves to Africa and leaves behind a close relationship with her mother and a luxurious life in an Italian villa for hardship and uncertainty, we must be satisfied with Kuki's cursory explanation, "I have stopped growing." The movie repeatedly presents such complex events and decisions in simplistic terms. As well, there are moments where poetic license might have been taken with the autobiography. It is impossible to take Basinger, and Eva Marie Saint as her mother, seriously as native Italians. Basinger makes no attempt to capture Kuki's Italian roots -- not even an Italian accent -- and so her Kuki is a bland American whose coolness is hard to believe, considering that she's chucked it all to move to Africa.

But the above are minor problems when compared to the film's structural weaknesses. It suffers from uneven pacing, between the slow start in Italy and the rushed hodgepodge of tragic events that make the follow. The first "act" takes places in Venice and covers Kuki's near fatal car accident and long recovery, her courtship with Paolo and their marriage, her son's acceptance of Paolo as a new father figure, and her mother's resistance to the move. Yet the story begins in Africa — not Italy — and we want to get there already. Once we do get there, the plot is moved forward by a string of misfortunes. Life on the couple's cattle ranch is harsh and there are numerous disasters. Car accidents, sand storms, run-ins with lions and elephants, and violent encounters with poachers apparently allow that growth Kuki sought, but with so many events and so little reflection, it is hard to make sense of how they help her develop. And so, her house becomes the primary way to assess her personal maturation, for despite the complications, Kuki creates a home and garden worthy of Martha Stewart.

We have to rely on these external clues because we can never get to know the inner life of the characters because the dialogue is limited and superficial. It wouldn't have to be *My Dinner with Andre*, but more conversation would be helpful. The script is replete with empty pronouncements and underdeveloped conversations, such as when Kuki must leave her son at a boarding school and she asks herself, "Why is love so hard? Or, when Kuki and Paolo rush to fight off poachers and end up arriving after the animal is killed, she cries, "What kind of people do this?" and Paolo replies tersely, "Butchers!" As if to compensate for this dearth of dialogue, the film offers Kuki's voiceovers. Though voiceover can be an effective device for detailing a character's interior life, it fails miserably here because Kuki doesn't have anything meaningful or even pithy to say. As she surveys the landscape about her, she can only note, "I am alone. Yet I am never alone. I am surrounded by Africa."

The film does work occasionally on an emotional level. Kuki's struggles as a wife and a mother obviously resonated with the audience with whom I saw the film, as they were audibly crying and sniffing when Basinger pulls out the stops in a few crucial scenes. Yet despite Kuki's suffering, her stubborn belief that she can find an inner peace in Africa alternates between sublime and selfish. That search for peace costs her family dearly, and the film asks us to praise her tenacity and determination, implying that these qualities lead to personal development. However, it ends up inadvertently making us question the toll her "growth" takes on those around her, by showing some awful destruction and death.

Kuki's final sentiment suggests that she has undergone some personal soul-searching: "Africa let us live an extraordinary life and then claimed an extraordinary price." But really, what is extraordinary about Kuki's life? Is fighting off a lion inherently extraordinary? Is ranching extraordinary? Did she really need to travel to a dangerous place to find meaning? What is the value of getting a foothold in Africa when bankrolled by Italian aristocrats? Interesting questions — but ones this film doesn't or can't answer. It cannot even address its most extraordinary aspect — how Kuki manages to be so clean and beautifully made up out in the African bush when everyone else is so dirty and disheveled.

The trite treatment of personal growth isn't the only way the film disappoints. Its politics are disturbing, completely glossing over the question of European imperialism in Africa. Instead, *I Dreamed of Africa* depicts, once again, gallant white folks coming to the rescue of a lesser folk who can't appreciate what they have. In this case, the rescuers are Paolo and Kuki, who attempt to save animals and drive Kenyan poachers off the ranch. The movie ends with an epigraph indicating that Kuki created a conservation foundation: this seems to be the film's "proof" that she's developed, yet it is tacked on as an afterthought.

Throughout, despite weak attempts to include Africans in the movie — namely, a few glimpses of native Kenyans who keep house and help on the ranch — this is a film about Europeans. The native Africans become just another element in the exotic landscape, allowing the film to sidestep the charged issues of racism and the legacy of imperialism in the 1980s. Paolo's interactions with the poachers provide a vague look at this legacy. The poachers kill to make money for food, and Paolo, a hunter, kills for sport. Yet, when he finally confronts the poachers, he is so enraged at their actions that he tries to beat them. The film ignores the similarities between Paolo's frequent hunting and the poachers' killing, and asks the viewer to take his side by showing his "concern" for wildlife and presenting the Africans as "butchers!"

Even the cinematography capitulates to old clichés. Bernard Lutic creates a sweeping panorama of Africa, which, while beautiful, rehashes National Geographic imagery. All that Africa seems to be to these European characters is a compilation of grand views and occasions to control nature. There are never enough movies about strong, interesting women — and this summer's testosterone fests such as *Gladiator*, *Battlefield Earth*, and *Mission Impossible 2* will be no exceptions — so it hurts to see such a promising opportunity missed.

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I Dreamed Of Africa
Review by Roger Ebert

It's strange to see "I Dreamed of Africa" at a time when the papers are filled with stories of white farmers being murdered in Zimbabwe. Here is the story of an Italian couple who move to the highlands of Kenya in 1972, buy a ranch near the Great Rift Valley and lead lives in which the Africans drift about in the background, vaguely, like unpaid extras. Is it really as simple as that? The realities of contemporary Africa are simply not dealt with.

A shame, since Kuki Gallmann is a real woman and still lives on Ol Ari Nyiro, a 100,000-acre ranch in Kenya that she has made into a showcase farm and wildlife conservancy. I know this because of her Web page (www.gallmannkenya.org); the movie never makes it very clear how the Gallmanns support themselves--it's not by working, apparently. Her husband Paolo is away for days at a time, hunting and fishing with his friends, and Kuki doesn't seem deeply engaged with the land, either (her attempt to create a dirt dam begins when she inadvertently pulls down a barn and ends with the tractor stuck in the mud).

The real Kuki Gallmann must have arrived at an accommodation with Africa and Africans, and with the Kenyan government. The Kuki in the movie has a few brief conversations in Swahili with her farm foreman and laborers, but devotes most of her attention to the landscape, which is indeed breathtaking (the film was shot on her ranch and in South African game preserves). The only social commentary we get, repeated three times, is, "Things have a different rhythm here." Kuki is played by Kim Basinger, who is ready to do more than the screenplay allows. She is convincing throughout, especially in a scene where trouble strikes her son Emanuele (Garrett Strommen)--her panic is real, but so is her competence as she tries to deal with the emergency. Her frustration with Paolo (Vincent Perez), is also real but mundane (frustrated at his extended hunting trips and general irresponsibility, she throws a handful of pasta at him).

Her life is interrupted from time to time by visits from her mother (Eva Marie Saint), who begs her to return to Italy, but, no, she belongs to the land, learns from experience, and tries to bring good out of the tragedies in her life by becoming a conservationist and a leader in the fight against poaching.

All admirable. But Hugh Hudson's film plays curiously like a friendly documentary of Kuki's life, especially with the voice-over narration that sounds like it belongs in an idealistic travelogue. There is a lack of drama and telling detail. When events happen, they seem more like set pieces than part of the flow. Consider the big storm that blows up, toppling the windmill and blowing the thatch from the ranch house roof. It strikes, it is loud and fierce, and then it is over, and after one more shot, it is forgotten. An entry in a diary, growing from nothing, leading to nothing, but occupying screen time. As is the scene where Kuki, Paolo and her mother drive a Range Rover down a rough road, and it gets stuck in the mud (that happens to her a lot). What to do? They get out and walk home. The film doesn't even show them arriving there.

Watching "I Dreamed of Africa," I was reminded that one often meets people who have led fascinating lives, but only rarely people who can tell fascinating stories. The events don't make the story; the storytelling does. Russell Baker or Frank McCourt can make human sagas out of everyday memories. Generals who have led thousands into battle can write memoirs of stultifying dullness. Kuki Gallmann has led a fascinating life, yes, but either she's not remembering the whole truth or she should have made up more. The film doesn't sing with urgency and excitement, and we attend it in the same way we listen politely to the stories of a hostess who must have really been something, in her day.

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