

New TV series pushes the boundaries in Kenya

A Kenyan-German co-production TV series has broken down barriers and created new norms based on its unique focus on the rural communities of Kenya, as well as its collaborative and Kenya focused production process.



The *Country Queen* TV series set.

With its cinematic production style and quality, the pilot of Kenya's *Country Queen* has been widely acclaimed and will soon continue with production of the full series.

Country Queen was first created in 2017 by a writers' room comprising 10 Kenyan creatives with diverse experience in visual storytelling, and with the assistance of Good Karma Fiction from Germany. The writers included Lydia Matata, Annette Shadeya, Mkamzee Mwatela, Shirleen Wangari, Oprah Oyugi, Wanjeri Gakuru, Kimani Waweru, Florence Onyango, Ian Kithinji and Kamau Wandung'u. As part of the process, all of the writers underwent a series of workshops run by Brazilian Telenovela specialists James McSill and Carla Bohler.

Country Queen focuses on the fast-paced and perilous world of Nairobi as well as on the slower rural life, told through the rarely highlighted tribe of the Akamba community. The pilot episode was shot 7-25 January 2019, across various stunning locations in Nairobi, Machakos and Kajiado counties. It involved 45 actors, 10 crew members and 160 extras, almost all of whom are Kenyan.

The *Country Queen* pilot is directed by Vincent Mbaya, a Kenyan professional who started his career in 2000 as an actor and has worked across various disciplines including documentary film, reality TV, commercials and drama. Directing coach Carla Bohler codirected.

Mbaya had this to say of working on the pilot, "As a passionate story teller, I for a long time had felt a gap as there was not much narrative work up for grabs at the quality that would really get me excited. When I had my first meeting about *Country Queen*, I knew that gap would be filled. The process turned out to be quite fulfilling, very detailed, nothing left to chance, an opportunity to exercise my creative muscles in a world class drama production. I cannot wait to get going on the full series."

The series is co-produced by award winning Kenyan producer, Kamau Wandung'u, born and raised in Mathare near Nairobi, Kamau has been an actor, director and producer for over 15 years and is best known for directing the ZIFF Ousmane Sembene Award Winner, *Maria*, and producing the award winning, *Ndoti Za Elibidi*.

The film's director of photography, Andrew Mungai, has been trained in LA and has been working as a cinematographer on independent feature films, short films, documentaries and music videos since 2009, including on films such as *KatiKati*, that won the FIPRESCI Award at the 2016 TIFF.

The film also boasts a strong ensemble cast that combines many of Kenya's best known actors, as well as young emerging talent.

The lead role of the beautiful and ambitious Akisa is played by Melissa Kiplagat, an internationally trained professional actress who, after securing her degree in Economics from the Ivy-League Brown University, found herself returning to acting in time to be trained by some of the best acting instructors in the US, including Lowry Marshal and Kym Moore.

Playing the role of the ruthless and intelligent Vivienne is Nini Wacera, one of Kenya's most well known and loved actresses who has appeared in more than a dozen films and television series including *Desperate Housewives Africa* and *Rafiki*. Blessing Lung'aho, known for his roles on *Mother-in-Law* and *PREM*, plays Max, Vivienne's charming husband, a former gangster who now runs the seedy side of her mining company.

Melvin Alusa, who first rose to fame during his stint on *Big Brother Hotshot*, plays the reluctant hero Kyalo, while Sheila Munyiva, who recently starred in *Rafiki*, plays the village's medical officer and Kyalo's lovable girlfriend next door, Anna.

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