

Escape from Luanda  
72 Minutes, 2006 Angola  
The Cinema Guild  
Director: Phil Grabsky  
In Portuguese with English subtitles

Escape from Luanda (2005) is a heartwarming documentary about overcoming the tribulations of poverty and violence, and turning personal dreams into realities. The film is centered on the interviews of three students- Joanna, 23; Alfredo, 21; and Domingas, 42- living and studying music in the Angolan capital of Luanda. Their personal insights on the pressures that family life, society, violent conflict and governmental policies have on their ability to pursue their studies inspires such empathy in the viewer that one finds him/herself cheering for the success of these three individuals.

Despite the connections that Escape from Luanda creates between the audience and Joanna, Alfredo and Domingas, the documentary does not achieve its potential as a film bearing witness to the challenges faced by Angolans in a post-war nation. The filmmakers corner themselves into this situation when they introduce contextual material about events that affected their interviewees but fail to do so thoroughly, leaving unanswered many of the questions that arise out of the inception of such information. For example, brief facts about the Angolan civil war and an interview of Joanna relating how her brother died in the war are presented at the beginning. Beyond Joanna's story, the interviewer is left wondering what the conflict was about, how the war affected the other students in the film and their current situations, and -consequently- the Angolan society in general.

Alfredo, Domingas and Joanna also expound the reasons why music is their escape out of poverty and their refuge in the midst of personal problems and suffering. But what does this mean contextually? What are the real possibilities for them to become successful? If they escape from Luanda, where is their success likely to take them? - The film provides no answers to these questions, questions that are relevant because the viewer cannot grasp what the future might look like for them in the absence of examples of success stories from the Angolan music scene. Furthermore, since there is an attempt to contextualize the stories of these students in the socio-economic and political Angolan milieu (e.g. in Alfredo's playing at a high class social club), it is surprising that wealth inequality, corruption and governmental policies, and how these affect the poor in that country are not further explored to give substance and support to the past and present challenges the students face.

The approachability the audience is made to feel towards the individuals presented in Escape from Luanda is not enough to make the documentary a recommendable one. The film fails to comprehensively contextualize the individual lives of Joanna, Domingas and Alfredo in the society that they belong to, ergo inadequately addressing the reciprocal connections between their stories as average citizens

trying to live up to their dreams and the environmental conditions that must be surmounted to bring these dreams to fruition.

Viewers interested in a rags-to-riches story will enjoy *Escape from Luanda*. Scholars and students interested in African Studies will be disappointed by the lack of substantive data.

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