

Queen of Katwe

In the mood for a heart warmer? Look no further than “Queen of Katwe,” the incredible story of a poor Ugandan child’s life remade through playing chess--no less. The film, based on a true story written by journalist Tim Crowther, brings pathos and triumph in equal measures as it traces the amazing five-year journey of one Phiona Mutesi (Madina Nalwange).

Phiona’s saga begins in 2007, when the young girl is helping her widowed mother Harriet (Lupita Nyong’o) sell maize on the dirt streets of Katwe, an urban slum residing within the capital city of Kampala, Uganda. The family survives in a crude shack where Phiona lives with her mom, older sister Night, and two younger brothers. Her future, just like her mother’s, is bleak.

She becomes curious about a striving youth chess club mentored by a local government worker, Robert Katende (David Oyelowo), who welcomes her to the club only to find that she has an innate knack for the game. She can envision moves even though she is illiterate and becomes the best player in the club, even winning a local tournament. Harriet, puzzled by her daughter’s success, is skeptical of her attention being diverted away from home and family.

As years pass, Phiona rises to new heights in the game, even able to represent her country in international matches. An eventual loss to an older player breaks her confidence, but Katende, who recognizes her genius, stokes that confidence anew, up to the finale of the nationwide chess tournament.

This is a Disney family movie (it’s OK to take the kids) but not a treacherous one: the life and personal struggles are real, the family quandaries likewise, but their sweet resolution seems honest and genuine. The reality of the picture, securely directed by the Indian-American Mira Nair from a script by William Wheeler, is heightened through graphic—yet colorful—depictions of the actual Katwe itself, a vast, tumbling shantytown with only the promise of the capital in the distance. The movie truly *feels* African, a place where the red dust of East Africa surrounds you.

The picture is also well served by its leads. Oyelowo (Dr. King in “Selma”) is patient and compelling as Katende, the very model of a mentor, and Nyong’o (Oscar winner for “12 Years a Slave”) balances her market-wise skepticism with delicate maternal touches (and she looks great in lively Ugandan frocks). Miss Nalwange bears the burden of the picture, and she is a natural, both shy and curious, rueful in her daily life but dogged in competition. She navigates changes from the super-shy youngster through the petulant daughter to the poised champion—and carries them all off with grace. She merits the eponymous title of the picture.

Director Mira Nair has had an amazingly varied and distinguished career in film over four continents: in her native India with films like “Salaam Bombay” and “Monsoon Wedding,” in England with “Vanity Fair,” and in the US with “Mississippi Masala” and “The Namesake.” Now she has taken on Africa—where she organizes an annual filmmakers’ laboratory program in Uganda—with “Queen of Katwe.” Her familiarity with the land and the spirit of the place is palpable and believable.

Stay for the end credits where each principal actor is joined on a set by the actual Ugandan they are playing. This capstone really warms the heart.
(The film is rated "PG"—contains nothing objectionable--and runs 124 mins.)

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