

FILM REVIEW

Stanlee Ohikhuare, dir. *A Tune Away*. 2022. 90 minutes. English. Nigeria. Mighty Jot Studios/We-Entertainment. No price reported.

Stanlee Aideloje Ohikhuare, an Edo State-based Nigerian filmmaker, holds a Fine Arts degree from the University of Benin and a Diploma in Arts from the Yaba College of Technology. A multi-talented artist proficient in 3D animation, graphic design, video editing, visual effects, and stunt direction, his notable films include *A Tune Away* (2022), *YAHOO taboo* (2020), *Idahosa Trails* (2017), and *Stupid Movie* (2015).

A Tune Away is a film dedicated to people living with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The story centers on a 24-year-old woman named Anita (Genoveva Umeh), who returns from study abroad and enrolls as a volunteer at the Alex Therapeutic Boarding School (ATBS), a school for children with ASD. She is joined by other volunteers such as Theodora (Omowunmi Dada) and Alex Oliha (Nelson Allison). Mr. Sam (Patrick Harry Doyle), the school director, provides some background about the institution, informing them that the school risks being shut down due to lack of staff. He adds that the founders, Alex and Itohan, who had been married many years without children, were devastated when they welcomed a set of twins only to discover that they were autistic. Stella (Ireti Doyle), Itohan's niece, deferred her university admission in order to look after the children. Itohan later died in the presence of her autistic daughter who could not help, and Alex, infuriated by this, picked his daughter up and shook her violently, but unfortunately, she slipped from his hands and died. Alex died after dedicating his entire wealth to autism research and establishing a school for autistic children. Anita befriends Omon (Oreofe Osisami), the founder's son, and tries to help him learn to manage his condition as she researches treatment for ASD. Despite initial resistance from both Stella and Omon, her determination and dedication lead to progress for Omon, who eventually learns to express his emotions and even falls in love with her. However, at this point, Anita leaves for the UK and subsequently returns for her wedding, leaving Omon disappointed but finally able to master the challenges of his condition and live a normal life.

A Tune Away is an important film because it highlights the themes of love, patience, selflessness, persistence, and the need to look out for others who are in need. Anita exemplifies these qualities, as evidenced by her commitment to helping Omon overcome his challenges, even in the face of opposition from Stella and Omon, who were initially very oppositional toward her. In the end, love triumphs over adversity, as seen in the positive transformation in the life of Omon. Anita gives up the name "Lonewalker" and breaks out of her lonely shell

by agreeing to be married. With Anita's success, Stella admits that she used to think she was close to Omon, but she was really just another stranger. She then thanks Anita for helping Omon find his voice. The film demonstrates the transformative power of empathy and understanding for people living with autism spectrum disorder, as well as the human capacity for connection and progress.

In terms of style, the deliberate use of ominous, eerie, low-pitched growling, creaking sounds, screams, cries, and other diegetic sounds, creates an ambiance that matches the moving still images. Similarly, the use of suggestive sound effects and soft music heightens the narrative's somber mood, emphasizing the importance of reflecting on the challenges faced by people with autism spectrum disorder, as well as the need for caution for people with the condition who want to marry. Given their common experience with ASD, Mr. Sam advises his nephew, Alex, not to make the same mistake he did by marrying Theodora, whom he loves.

Throughout the film, the recurring symbol of a baby doll, played with and sometimes discarded by Omon, underscores the human need for care, akin to parental nurturing. Anita plays this symbolic role in her disposition toward Omon. The director masterfully blends fantasy and realism throughout the film, particularly in the penultimate scene. Here, Omon fantasizes about marrying Anita, a dream that culminates in his placing a ring on her finger. This act blurs the line between his desires and reality, showcasing the power of imagination and the human tendency to seek solace in fantasy. However, the harsh reality of Anita's actual marriage to her childhood friend shatters Omon's wishful vision. This twist serves as a powerful symbol of human vulnerability, highlighting the universal desire for affection and the complex realities of love and relationships.

A Tune Away elevates African cinema, challenges misconceptions about autism in Nigeria and other parts of Africa, and dismantles labels that categorize individuals with ASD as "imbeciles" or "demon-possessed." Spotlighting their strengths and struggles, it reminds us to see the individuals beyond their diagnosis and to recognize their potential to contribute to society.

The film's impactful storytelling, enriched by music and visuals, transcends cultural barriers, fostering emotional connections with diverse audiences. Like *93 Days* (Gukas, 2016), a Nigerian production by Native FilmWorks, Michel Angelo Production, and Bolanle Austen-Peters Production, which explores the role of Nigerian health workers in defeating the 2014 Ebola outbreak, *A Tune Away* serves as a powerful tool for social change. Both films showcase the potential of African cinema to address crucial issues and inspire positive reforms, cementing its position in inspiring conversation and societal transformations.

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