

African films and series that made waves internationally in 2020

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Zog, The Snail and the Whale, Rafiki, Moffie, Buddha in Africa, Yvonne Orji: Momma, I Made It and more.

Zog | Animated short

Zog was named Best Animation at the 2020 International Emmy Kids Awards and won the 2020 Children's Programme Award from the Royal Television Society, among other honours like Kidscreen, Annie and British Animation Awards nominations.

Animated in Cape Town by Triggerfish and produced by the UK's Magic Light Pictures, the 27-minute animated short captures the magic of Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler's bestselling picture book, with an all-star voice cast including the likes of Kit Harington, Sir Lenny Henry and Tracey Ullman. It's co-directed by multi-award-winning South African Daniel Snaddon (*Stick Man*) and two-time Oscar nominee Max Lang (*The Gruffalo* and *Room On The Broom*).

Zog is the keenest but clumsiest pupil in his class at Dragon School, where he longs to win a gold star as he learns how to fly, roar and breathe fire. He keeps meeting a kindly young girl who patches up his bumps and bruises, but can she help him with his trickiest school assignment yet: capturing a princess?

***The Snail and The Whale* | Animated short**

The Snail and The Whale won the 2020 Venice TV Award for Children/Youth, as well as Best Voice Performance (for Oscar nominee Sally Hawkins as the snail) at the 2020 British Animation Awards, where it was also nominated for Best Longform Animation and Best Use of Sound.

The Snail and The Whale follows the amazing journey of a tiny snail who longs to see the world and hitches a ride on the tail of a huge humpback whale. It's a joyous, empowering tale about our wonderful world and discovering that, however small you are, you can make a difference.

The Snail and the Whale is produced by the Oscar-nominated Magic Light Pictures and animated in Cape Town by Triggerfish, with South African Daniel Snaddon co-directing with two-time Oscar nominee Max Lang (*The Gruffalo* and *Room On The Broom*). The half-hour adaptation of *The Gruffalo* author Julia Donaldson and illustrator Axel Scheffler's best-selling children's book is also voiced by British Comedy Award winner Rob Brydon as the whale and Golden Globe nominee Dame Diana Rigg as the narrator. Rigg - best known as Olenna Tyrell in *Game of Thrones*; Emma Peel in the TV series *The Avengers*; and Countess Teresa di Vicenzo, James Bond's wife in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* - passed away in September 2020.

***Rafiki* | Romance film**

Wanuri Kahiu's *Rafiki* was named Outstanding Film - Limited Release at the 2020 GLAAD Media Awards, which recognise and honour media for their fair, accurate and inclusive representations of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) community and the issues that affect their lives. *Rafiki* beat out the likes of Pedro Almodóvar's *Pain and Glory*, nominated for both Oscars and Golden Globes this year; 2020 Golden Globe and BAFTA nominee *Portrait of A Lady On Fire*; Sundance audience award winner Brittany *Runs a Marathon*; and South African favourite *Kanarie*, starring Schalk Bezuidenhout.

"Good Kenyan girls become good Kenyan wives," but Kena (Samantha Mugatsia, who won Best Actress at Carthage 2018

and FESPACO 2019 for the role) and Ziki (Sheila Munyiva) long for something more. When love blossoms between them, the two girls are forced to choose between happiness and safety.

The Kenyan film has a 93% critics rating on Rotten Tomatoes, with *Variety* calling it “impossible not to celebrate”; RogerEbert.com “a lyrical ode to finding a kindred spirit amidst an uncaring majority”; AV Club “bursting with life”; and *Washington Post* “a small revelation, not least because it marks the breakthrough of a filmmaker of such exhilarating, cheerfully courageous vision.”

***Moffie* | Drama film**

Currently on the longlist for the Golden Globe’s Foreign Film category, *Moffie* won the Film Critics Special Jury Prize at the 2020 Dublin International Film Festival and has a 100% critics rating from Rotten Tomatoes, with *Variety* raving, “South African auteur Oliver Hermanus makes his masterpiece with this brutal but radiant story of young gay desire on the Angolan war front... establishing him quite plainly as South Africa’s most vital contemporary filmmaker... Both a shiver-delicate exploration of unspoken desire and a scarringly brilliant anatomy of white South African masculinity. It fair takes your breath away.”

Adapted from an autobiographical 2006 novel by André Carl van der Merwe, *Moffie* is set in South Africa, 1981, with the white minority government embroiled in a conflict on the southern Angolan border. Like all white boys over the age of 16, Nicholas van der Swart (Kai Luke Brummer) must complete two years of compulsory military service to defend the Apartheid regime. The threat of communism and die swart gevaar is at an all-time high. But that’s not the only danger Nicholas faces. He must survive the brutality of the army – something that becomes even more difficult when a connection is sparked between him and a fellow recruit.

Coming to Showmax from 31 December 2020, *Moffie* is produced by South African-born Eric Abraham, who has produced two Oscar-winning films: Pawel Pawlikowski’s *Ida* and Jan Sverak’s *Kolya*. Abraham is also the founder and benefactor of The Fugard Theatre in Cape Town.

Die Verhaal van Racheltjie de Beer | Drama film

Die Verhaal Van Racheltjie De Beer won the Kidseye award at the 2020 Rhode Island Film Festival, an Oscar-qualifying festival in the USA, as well as three Golden Horns – for Cinematography, Sound Design, and Original Score – at the 2020 SAFTAs.

South Africa's wilderness in the 1800s: Five years after their mother died, Racheltjie and five-year-old Jamie find themselves on their way to the gold fields with their father, Herman, to start a new life. But winter is closing in fast, and when Jamie goes missing in a freak snowstorm, Rachel must brave the deadly cold to search for her little brother...

The beloved heroine of this Afrikaans folktale is brought to life by Zonika de Vries (*Dis Koue Kos, Skat*). The stellar cast includes SAFTA Lifetime Achievement Award winner Marius Weyers, Naledi Lifetime Achievement Award winner Sandra Prinsloo, and SAFTA winners Antoinette Louw (*An Act of Defiance, Goodbye Bafana*) and Seputla Sebogodi (*Generations, The Republic*), with newcomer Johannes Jordaan as Jamie. The movie is directed by Matthys Boshoff (*Vlees van My Vlees*, Huggies' award-winning *Baby Marathon* campaign), who co-wrote the script with Brett Michael Innes (*Fiela se Kind, Sink*).

Yvonne Orji: Momma, I Made It! | Comedy special

In her first HBO comedy special, Nigeria's Yvonne Orji, better known as Molly from *Insecure*, has the audience rolling with laughter as she brings her razor-sharp wit and confidence to the stage. Both celebrating and poking fun at her strict, formative Nigerian-American upbringing, Yvonne shares her unique journey from pre-med to comedy, talks about parental pressures to get married, and takes us along to Lagos to meet her family and friends.

Entertainment Weekly calls *Momma, I Made It!* "an hour of joy", IndieWire hails it as "a rip-roaring standup special," and Fast Company says it's "the laugh the black community needs right now."

In 2020, Yvonne also recently earned her first Emmy nomination and her fourth Black Reel nomination in a row as Molly in *Insecure*.

***Lusala* | Drama movie**

Lusala won the Rimbaud award at the 2020 Les Rimbaud du Cinéma, held in France at the oldest active cinema in the world.

Brian Ogola (*18 Hours* and *Poacher*) stars as Lusala, adopted by an affluent Nairobi family a decade ago, but now imposed on to leave home and start on his own. Eager and willing at first, he makes the most of his life, until the demons from his past return, and he has to face them on his own. Stycie Waweru (Jo in *Supa Modo*) co-stars.

Lusala is the directorial debut of Mugambi Nthiga, who co-wrote *Kati Kati* and *Supa Modo*, and acted in *Nairobi Half Life* and *Stories of Our Lives* – four critically acclaimed Kenyan films awarded at Toronto, Berlin, and AFI respectively, among many other festivals.

***Buddha in Africa* | Documentary**

Buddha in Africa won a Special Mention at Docudays 2020 in Ukraine and also took home Best Documentary and Best

Directing at the 2020 SAFTAs.

In a Chinese Buddhist orphanage in Africa, a Malawian teenager finds himself torn between his African roots and Chinese upbringing. Once the star performer with dreams of becoming a martial arts hero like Jet Li, Enock is now in his final year of school and has to make some tough decisions about his future. Will he return to his relatives in his home village or study abroad in Taiwan?

Directed by South African Nicole Schafer, *Buddha in Africa* was praised by *Variety* as “a complicated portrait of what’s been described as the latest chapter in Africa’s long struggle against colonization”.

***Stroop: Journey Into The Rhino Horn War* | Nature documentary**

Stroop: Journey Into The Rhino Horn War was nominated for the Doclights/NDR Naturfilm Producer Director Award at Wildscreen, arguably the most prestigious wildlife filmmaking event in the world.

The gripping wildlife crime thriller takes the viewer on a rollercoaster ride between Africa and Asia. Two first-time filmmakers, award-winning editor Susan Scott (*The Last Lions*) and *50/50* presenter Bonné de Bod, embed themselves on the frontlines of the rhino poaching crisis, where they are given exclusive access to the war as it unfolds on the ground. Carving out six months for the project, the two women quickly find themselves immersed in a world far larger and more dangerous than they had imagined, only emerging from their odyssey four years later. The resulting film has won over 30 international awards, including Best of Festival at The International Wildlife Film Festival, and was shortlisted for two awards at Jackson Wild.

Scott and De Bod's new film, *Kingdoms of Fire, Ice & Fairy Tales*, is now streaming on Showmax.

***Noughts + Crosses* S1 | Alternative history series**

South African costume designer Dihantus Engelbrecht earned a Costume Design – Drama nomination from the 2020 Royal Television Society Awards in the UK for his work on *Noughts + Crosses*, a controversial six-part BBC One series based on Malorie Blackman's multi-award-winning novel.

South African Masali Baduza (*Trackers*) and BAFTA winner Jack Rowan (*Born To Kill*, *Peaky Blinders*) play Sephy and Callum, two star-crossed lovers in the tradition of Romeo and Juliet, in an alternate universe where Africa colonised Europe, rather than the other way round. Shot largely in Cape Town with Film Afrika, the series also stars South African actress Bonnie Mbuli (*Invictus*, *Wallander*) as Sephy's mom, Jasmine. Koby Adom - who is from Ghana, was born in Cote d'Ivoire, and grew up in London - is one of the two directors.

Times (UK) praised it as "mesmerising... It's important, this one. We'll be talking about it for years."

***Famalam* S3 | Sketch comedy**

Black sketch comedy finally took centre stage in 2020, with HBO's *A Black Lady Sketch Show* nominated for three Emmys and BBC3's *Famalam* up for a BAFTA, with Nigerian star and co-creator Gbemisola Ikumelo competing for Best Female Performance in a Comedy. Teaser sketches from *Famalam* have gone viral repeatedly on Facebook Watch, with six of the sketches already over 100 million combined views there.

In Season 3, we see our favourite aunties handle their nephew coming out, learn how to make White People Chicken, watch the rudest *Midsomer Murders* ever, catch up with the Nigerian prince who no one emails back, and see two cartels going to war - over the booming avocado trade... Look out for Ivorian Tom Moutchi doing a killer Idris Elba imitation too.

The Independent (UK) praises *Famalam* as "a sublime achievement of satire", saying, "Like all the best sketch shows, *Famalam* is a mix of comforting recurring characters and scenes, but tweaked with a delightful and clever wit on every outing." Similarly, *The Guardian* hails *Famalam* as "quickfire, playful comedy, rooted in the black British experience."

***Trackers* S1 | Action series**

Fresh from outperforming *Game of Thrones* – and everything else on M-Net last year - *Trackers* was released internationally by HBO and Cinemax in June 2020.

Based on Deon Meyer's bestselling novel, *Trackers* has an 88% critics rating on Rotten Tomatoes. In America, Meaww raved, "Packed with thrills and chills, *Trackers* whisks viewers towards a violent conspiracy involving organized crime, state security, and an international terrorist plot... James Gracie and Thapelo Mokoena take centre stage with their amazing performances," while *The New York Times* called it "a more polished product than *Blood & Water*... more easily entertaining... James Gracie... can do a lot with silent looks of doubt and reproach." In Israel, Haaretz called it "the guilty pleasure" of the week, adding, "it comes to life when it places Cape Town front and center." And in New Zealand, Stuff called it "a high-octane thriller... a good rollicking story."

***Knuckle City* | Boxing movie**

At the end of November 2020, *Knuckle City* was named the most nominated film at the 2020 Africa Movie Academy Awards (AMAA), where it's up for 12 awards, including Best Film, Best Actor (SAFTA winner Bongile Mantsai from *Inxeba | The Wound*), Best Director (multiple-SAFTA winner Jahmil X.T. Qubeka, who is also making the upcoming Showmax Original *Blood Psalms*), and Best Supporting Actress (Faniswa Yisa from upcoming Showmax Original *DAM*).

In South Africa's powerful 2020 Oscar entry, an ageing, womanising professional boxer (Mantsai) and his career-criminal brother (Thembekile Komani) take one last shot at success and get more than they've bargained for. "It is impossible not to be completely consumed by *Knuckle City*," wrote *The Globe and Mail* when the film premiered at Toronto International Film Festival, describing it as "*Raging Bull* meets *Rocky*, but in South Africa" and praising its navigation of "the painful issues of toxic masculinity, age and the impossible-seeming choices one can be forced to make to ensure the survival of themselves and the people they love... Mantsai's performance is gripping, electrifying and heart-breaking."

A rare South African film with a 100% critics rating on *Rotten Tomatoes*, *Knuckle City* was the most awarded film at this year's SAFTAs, taking home six awards, including Best Director and Best Actor for Mantsai.

***The Ghost and The House of Truth* | Crime drama**

At the end of November 2020, *The Ghost and The House of Truth* was named the third most nominated film at the Africa Movie Academy Awards (AMAA), where it's up for seven awards, including Best Film and Best Director (Akin Omotoso, who previously won the category for *Vaya*).

Bola Ogun (BAFTA Breakthrough Brit winner Susan Wokoma from *Enola Holmes*) is a dedicated counsellor who facilitates reconciliation sessions between convicts and the victims of their crimes. But when her own daughter goes missing, her belief in forgiveness is tested.

Shot in Makoko, Nigeria, the award-winning crime drama also stars AMAA Best Actress winner Kate Henshaw (*Chief Daddy, 4th Republic*) as Folashade, a police inspector in the Child Protection Unit, and AMAA Best Young Actor winner Kemi Lala Akindoju (*Dazzling Mirage, Banana Island Ghost, Fifty*), who also co-produced.

***The Letter Reader* | Short film**

At the end of November 2020, *The Letter Reader* was nominated for Best Short Film at The Africa Movie Academy Awards. Directed by Sibusiso Khuzwayo, *The Letter Reader* also won Best Short at the 2020 SAFTAs.

Inspired by Thabo Mbeki's biography, *A Dream Deferred*, *The Letter Reader* tells the story of Siyabonga, a 12-year-old boy from Johannesburg who is sent to a village in KwaZulu-Natal to live with his grandmother while his parents are sorting out their marital problems. As a city boy who is not accustomed to doing household chores, Siyabonga struggles to adapt. He discovers the power of words as he reads letters that put a smile on people's faces, until one day, a letter with bad news lands in his hands...

The late Andile Gumbi, best known for playing Simba in *The Lion King* musical, leads the cast, while multiple-SAFTA winner Lance Gewer (*Tsotsi*, *Happiness Is A Four-Letter Word*) DoPs.

Local favourites

Of course, what international awards think of local content isn't the most important barometer: ultimately Showmax is more focused on African content for Africans. But the steady flow of international accolades are a good sign that our content is ready to compete with the best in the world.

Keep an eye out in January when Showmax will reveal the even more important list: the most watched African films and series of 2020...

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