

In To Africa

Students Trek To Kenya To Shoot The Knife Grinder's Tale

Malaria scares, military guards with AK47s, and an imposing African Kingpin are not your typical encounters to filming a movie on the streets of Los Angeles, but for two third-year production graduate students at the USC School of Cinematic Arts, it's all part of the process as they bring a Kenyan short story to the screen.

Following a summer trip to Kenya for a friend's wedding, director R.L. Hooker's passion for the African nation became the focus of his thesis film. Not "wanting to be that guy who wrote about Kenya without knowing anything about it," as Hooker put it, he began a search for material that led him to *The Knife Grinder's Tale* by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor. Ironically, Owuor was in the United States at Williams College in Massachusetts, where the author was giving a speech on women's rights in Africa. Unable to meet with her in-person, the writer/director faxed a pitch letter to her hotel, and within hours, Owuor was on board.

"This story tugs on your heartstrings and it was important to tell," Hooker said as he detailed why he was drawn to adapt Owuor's short fiction. *Knife Grinder* portrays a father's journey away from his village on a trek to discover that his son was murdered for their only means of communication—a cell phone. "I felt it was important to tell this story where it actually takes place," added Hooker, who lived in Kenya for three months over the summer, and stresses the significance of finding a local producer to any student considering an overseas shoot.

"The moment your feet hit the ground, you need to find someone who can help you," he said referring to his freelance Kenyan producer, Chiara Paglieri. "Without her, we wouldn't have a picture. Period."



"I never had a doubt that this experience would result in anything but success," said Hooker's friend and USC producer, Gregg Helvey. Although already familiar with the landscape due to his previous work on a documentary filmed in the African country, and armed with an extensive list of Kenyan contacts from a meeting he arranged with the production team behind the hit *The Constant Gardner*, Helvey agreed with his director on Paglieri's importance to the picture.

Another key player Hooker met through his connections was Sheila Peevers, head of Sounds and Pictures, who the director proudly calls the team's "fairy godmother." Peevers was instrumental in her company's generous donation of the Super 16 cameras—a package worth close to \$10,000—used to film *Knife Grinder's*.

"We lived and breathed this film," added Hooker. "Plus, by leaving the U.S., we found it strangely easier to make since there were fewer distractions."

Fewer perhaps, but the shoot had its own unique and unexpected factors.

"There's a lot of respect you have to have in order to work with the locals," Helvey said recalling the time during the production's time in Kibera, the largest slum in Eastern Africa and second largest in the world, when he thanked the aforementioned kingpin for his help.

"It can be a virtual bee's nest," Helvey added, describing the elder as "the kindest man we met on the entire shoot, but a tough guy who commanded the respect of anyone who crossed his path."

At one point, without hesitation, the kingpin turned and calmly told Helvey that without his protection, not only would the producer be left without a camera, but he'd also find a gun pointed to his head.

Despite more unforeseen circumstances that included threats of arrest, armed bandits lurking around their equipment, and a malaria scare for director of photography and 2005 production graduate Max Gutierrez, Hooker and his crew continually pushed forward on the film.



Throughout it all, Helvey purposely refrained from posting the intense experiences to his blog during the shoot because “I didn’t want anyone back home panicking.”

“There was never a point where we thought, ‘what are we getting into?’” said Hooker, who reveled in the down times after a long day’s work as one of the most enjoyable moments he spent with his crew. “We would cook, drink and shoot ideas back and forth. It was really conducive to the process.”

With a rough cut of *The Knife Grinder’s Tale* submitted to Sundance, Hooker is eager to put the finishing touches on his film. “The biggest thing for me was the passion I felt for this movie,” added the director. “It’s why we’re all involved. Nothing was sacrificed and we got it done.”

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The Knife Grinder’s Tale



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