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## FILM

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Avignon

# Welcome to Nollywood

(Documentary)

By LISA NESSELSON

Produced in association with Infinity Films Nigeria. (International sales: Jamie Meltzer.) Produced by Cayce Lindner, Henry S. Rosenthal. Directed, written by Jamie Meltzer;

**With:** Izu Ojukwu, Chico Ejiro, Don Pedro Obaseki, Charles Novia, Shan George, Peace Anyiam-Fiberesima, Tunde Kelani, J.T. Tom West, Richard Mofe-Damijo. (English dialogue)

**Attention aspiring filmmakers: Forget NYU, skip USC, ditch Robert McKee and get a load of Nigeria. There was no Nigerian film industry as recently as 1990, but Lagos-based Nollywood now produces some 2,400 features a year, putting the Afrocentric pic powerhouse in third place worldwide. Relentlessly entertaining and informative, Jamie Meltzer's "Welcome to Nollywood" boasts wall-to-wall bravado filtered through African-style entrepreneurship: Hook any of the producer-directors profiled here to a generator and the energy might just offset global reliance on oil. Docu is a must for cinema classrooms and fests and a hoot for curious auds on tube and beyond.**

Genially boastful Chico Ejiro (aka "Mr. Prolific"), of Grand Touch Pictures, has made so many films he can't recall all of their incredibly florid plots. His company's name was inspired by the fact that Whoopi Goldberg pic "Sister Act" came from some outfit called Touchstone.

Izu Ojukwu, who grew up with 40 family members on one modest spread "all eating out of the same pot," stole money as a kid to sneak off to the movies. Izu got a gander at a projector, went home and built one of his own from scratch, then figured out that motion pictures are made up of still frames.

Izu describes how he feels at one with the camera, risking his own neck to get impressive action shots. A hearty slice of the compact docu follows Izu's mammoth enterprise "Laviva," which deployed a cast of 700 and the precedent-setting cooperation of the Nigerian military to tell an epic tale of pan-African forces in war-torn Liberia.

Docu is wildly funny, one highlight being the Action Film Academy -- a boot camp for learning to take a punch, mimic martial-arts moves and go flying to the ground as if shot. When a volunteer with a cardboard-backed firecracker taped to his chest proudly waits for an instructor to light the fuse, one can only admire the low-budget effectiveness crossed with lunacy that characterizes Nollywood gumption.

As Peace Anyiam-Fiberesima, founder of the African Movie Academy Awards affirms, this bustling economy has arisen without any foreign or government aid. Thirty new films per week hit the streets, where they are made available as videocassettes or CDs in a Lagos electronics market one interviewee describes as "our Soho."

Docu contends that "Nollywood is now the third-largest film industry in the world, generating \$286 million per year for the Nigerian economy." Since the tapes themselves go for about \$3, that's not bad.

Helmets interviewed are also producers, and they hail "the democratization of the means of production" in the form of digital video. "Celluloid was expensive -- if you didn't have the money, you didn't have a voice," one practitioner asserts.

The films are made by Africans for African audiences who, based on clips and posters shown here, favor action and story over naturalistic thesping. Overwrought declaiming -- always handy when confronting evil spirits, recalcitrant women or other enemy forces -- seems to be a uniform house style.

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If a given pic doesn't inspire thousands to purchase it? "You lose your own money. You go home and cry and sleep," says one helmer knowingly.

Nigeria's do-or-die approach is communicated via lively lensing, snappy editing and a peppy score.

Docu ends a tad abruptly, but one exits the theater wondering how such a massive phenomenon could have gone largely undocumented until now -- and grateful that Vassar film prof Meltzer (2003's "Off the Charts: The Song Poem Story") opted to take a closer look.

Camera (color, DV), Bruce Dickson, Akinola Davies, Meltzer; editor, Daniel J. Friedman; associate producers, Chris Eriobu, Davies, Dickson. Reviewed at Avignon Film Festival (competing), June 21, 2007. Running time: 57 MIN.

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