

FILM REVIEW

Genevieve Nnaji, director. *Lionheart*. 2018. 95 minutes. English and Igbo, with English subtitles. Enugu, Nigeria. The Entertainment Network. Streaming on Netflix. No price reported.

Today, neatly separating Hollywood and Nollywood can be a challenge, particularly given increasingly common factors such as Netflix and Amazon. When, in late 2018, Netflix purchased the exclusive streaming rights to Genevieve Nnaji's directorial debut *Lionheart* (2018), it became the sole distributor of a film that it rather misleadingly branded "a Netflix original," attributing its corporate authorship to something that had been developed and completed under the auspices of a Nigerian studio (The Entertainment Network). Still, such a relationship troubles the simplistic dichotomy of center and periphery; at present, Nollywood is very much a participant (however partial or undercompensated) in the formal world economy.

Lionheart tells the story of Adaeze (played by Nnaji), a passionate, preternaturally self-possessed businesswoman. The director of logistics and operations for a bus company, the Enugu-based Lionheart Transport, of which her eminent father (played by Pete Edochie) is owner and managing director, Adaeze wants more—both for herself and for the family company that she loves with a nearly single-minded devotion. Dubbed the "number-one transport service in Nigeria," Lionheart boasts over two hundred buses and fifty thousand weekly passengers, a reputation for safety and comfort, and the capacity to move its fleet from Enugu to any of Nigeria's thirty-six states. When Adaeze's father suffers a heart attack, he names as his replacement not his brilliant, dedicated daughter, who has been working side by side with him for seven years, but instead his ne'er-do-well younger brother, Godswill, played by (who else?) Nkem Owoh. The hardworking Adaeze feels cheated; she suspects that she was passed over simply because she is a woman—a hypothesis that her mother tries to discredit, cautioning, "Don't ever come between two brothers!"

Adaeze remains director of logistics and operations at Lionheart, but her sheer professionalism is shaken with the arrival of the impish Godswill. Wearing a Panama hat and aviator shades, a toothpick jutting out of his mouth, Owoh makes a memorable entrance. More composed than his

Osuofia, Godswill is still very much a disruptor. Without delay, he institutes major changes at the offices of Lionheart, introducing morning prayers and making all employees gather in a vast conference room to sing salutations to God. “It’s not about chasing money,” he insists. “God is the provider of money.” Adaeze, as the realist, must remind him that Lionheart is in debt for nearly one billion naira; before his heart attack, her father had taken out a loan in order to acquire one hundred additional state-of-the-art buses. Sensing the company’s troubles—smelling blood, as it were—Maikano Motors, a transport service based in Kano, proposes a merger with Lionheart, a fusion of two fleets that will also, crucially, represent a linkage between North and South. “We must not miss this opportunity,” urges Godswill. But when a sleazy banker says that he will give Lionheart an additional loan in exchange for access to Adaeze’s body, Godswill punches him, and both he and his niece land in jail.

Lionheart is a thoroughly charming directorial debut. With its stunning aerial shots of Enugu (boasting cinematography by the great Yinka Edward), the film is a love letter to the city. And with a cast that includes such icons as Edochie, Owoh, Kanayo O. Kanayo, and, of course, Nnaji herself, it is also a love letter to Nollywood. What Nnaji provides is more than mere fan service, however. She directs with considerable warmth: Igbo family dinners hum with a love of language and cuisine; a lavish retirement party features traditional Igbo dancing; and Adaeze’s tentative romance with the heir to the Maikano Motors empire is a touching cross-cultural affair. Yet despite the obvious strength of Nnaji’s efforts as director, co-writer, executive producer, and star, *Lionheart* has suffered some fairly ignominious defeats at the hands not only of Nigerian exhibitors but also of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS). FilmHouse, one of Nigeria’s major movie theater chains, refused to screen *Lionheart*, precisely because, as Nnaji herself pointed out, the vertically integrated company (which has a production-distribution branch, FilmOne) did not have a stake in the film. Then came AMPAS’s decision to deem *Lionheart* ineligible for consideration for the Oscar for Best International Feature Film, on the grounds that Nnaji’s work features too much English. Since production wrapped, *Lionheart* has had to settle for a platform on Netflix. If streaming via such a major global service is not a small achievement, it still falls far short of what Nnaji had hoped to achieve with her debut—namely, the availability of the film in a range of formats befitting Nollywood’s heterogeneous audiences, not all of whom have access to the internet.

In acquiring so many Nollywood films, Netflix is simply following the line of thinking that Adam Smith laid out so succinctly in 1776: “If a foreign country can supply us with a commodity cheaper than we ourselves can make it, better buy it of them with some part of the produce of our own industry, employed in a way in which we have some advantage” (*The Wealth of Nations* [Bantam, 2003/1776], p. 573.) In the case of Netflix, that proprietary “part” is distribution—the streaming of audiovisual narratives. The company did not, by any definition of the term and despite the film’s official status as a “Netflix

original,” produce Nnaji’s *Lionheart*; it merely distributes it, demonstrating its considerable advantage in the streaming-services industry. The need to license low-cost Nigerian movies is, for Netflix, increasing in this age of Disney+ and other competitors, many of which plainly lack the explicit appeal to African viewers that the licensing of *Lionheart* represents. Yet Hollywood, however defined—whatever its “global” or “transnational” makeup at the present historical moment—continues to suffer from, and to reproduce, major misperceptions of Nigeria in general and of Nollywood in particular. Such misunderstandings clearly stem from the exclusion of Nigerians from the decision-making processes governing the circulation of their own films via Netflix and other American companies. When the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences denied the “international” status of *Lionheart*, Netflix did not put up a fight, presumably preferring to focus on the Oscar chances of its own original productions *The Irishman* (Martin Scorsese, 2019) and *Marriage Story* (Noah Baumbach, 2019). Nor did it permit Genevieve Nnaji to appeal the decision, even as various commentators—myself included—sought to expose the Academy’s ignorance. Yet Nnaji managed to make her film. That it exists at all remains a cause for celebration.

Noah Tsika 

Queens College, CUNY
Flushing, New York, USA
noah.tsika@qc.cuny.edu

doi:[10.1017/asr.2021.122](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2021.122)