



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2026 OFFICIAL SELECTION
UN CERTAIN REGARD

BRADLEY FIOMONA

CONGO BOY

A FILM BY

RAFIKI FARIALA

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PRESENT



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CONGO BOY

A FILM BY
Rafiki Fariala



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SYNOPSIS

Bangui, Central African Republic. 17-year-old Robert dreams of a career in music, but civil war is tearing the country apart. When both his parents are thrown into prison, he is left to look after his four younger siblings on his own, juggling daily life, odd jobs, school exams and concert stages, determined to follow his dream.



INTERVIEW WITH RAFIKI FARIALA

Is *Congo Boy* your story?

I'm a Congolese refugee who came to the Central African Republic as a child. *Congo Boy* is my story told through fiction—through the character of Robert, played by Bradley Fiomona. It's the story of the year my parents went to prison—the year I found myself alone with four younger siblings and forced to find a way to survive. The year music became my lifeline. Everything that happens in the film really happened to me.

Why did your parents go to prison?

When they saw things in the country going south, my parents—who had already fled the war in Congo—wanted to leave, but didn't have papers. The UNHCR* was unwilling to issue them travel documents, so they bought false papers, got caught, and were sent to prison. All they wanted was to escape the war and keep their family safe.

How did you and your brothers and sisters get by?

While our parents were in prison, we lived with a colonel in the gendarmerie who had taken us in. In exchange, I had to work for

him, keeping watch over his building site. The country wasn't safe; there were militias everywhere, making their own rules. The colonel wasn't home much and left me in charge, so I ended up managing pretty much everything at his place when he was away on duty or at the barracks. Then one day, Antibalaka militiamen surrounded the house to kill him—a revenge attack—but he wasn't there. Thinking I was his son, they came for me instead. They shot me and I dropped like a dead man. It was only later that an old nurse from the neighborhood, who treated me, explained that I'd simply passed out. She'd already dug an AK-47 bullet out of my foot, leaving a scar I still have today. Even now, a gunshot or a sudden loud noise takes me right back to that moment.

Later on, my aunt Zara, who I'd thought was dead, took us in. We shared her one-room apartment with her children.

Were you already making music at the time?

Yes, and I was desperately trying to find a way to get my parents released. I had no money for their bail—or for my own baccalaureate exam fees, for that matter. Then, a door opened: the inaugural edition of a competition called "Talents of Adolescents and Youth," organized by the Central African National Youth Council in partnership with UNICEF. I knew I could sing, and there was prize money on the table. Luck was on my side—I won, and even signed a contract with UNICEF to make a public service announcement against the exploitation of child miners and in favor of girls' education. My winnings paid the bail and brought my parents home.

*The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the UN agency mandated to protect and assist refugees worldwide.

How did you go about writing the screenplay?

I started by writing a first-person account of that year, as if I were writing a memoir. Then I had to turn that first draft into a screenplay, and that's where the real work began. I loved working with Tommy Baron, a young French screenwriter my age, who I now think of as a brother. We also had the support of Boris Lojkine, my producer and the man who opened the door to filmmaking for me. Both of them know my story and my family, which made the writing process much easier. I learned to take a step back from my personal story and shape it into a fictional screenplay. But I was determined not to let go of my own memories. The fiction had to honor my family's cultural values. I fought hard to stay true to my own perspective—even when that meant disagreeing with my collaborators.

Your previous film, *We, Students!*, was a documentary. How did you make the transition from documentary to fiction?

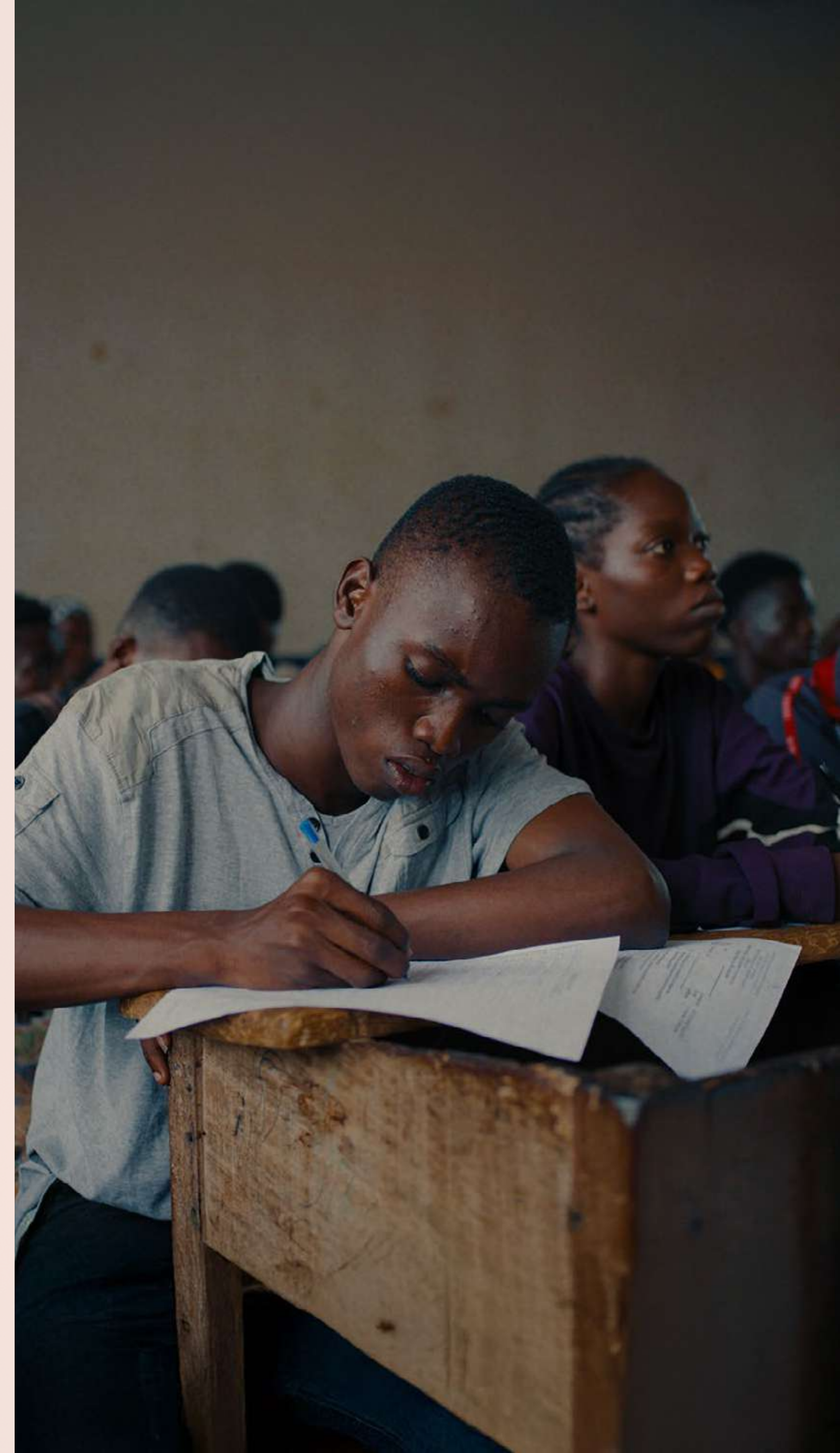
In *We, Students!*, there was already a thin layer of fiction, and conversely, in *Congo Boy*, a lot of documentary remains. Many of the locations are real, and many of the actors brought their own lives to their roles. The soldiers in the film, for example, are real soldiers playing themselves. Aunt Zara is my

actual aunt, playing herself. Keeping that connection to reality is important to me.

How did you find Bradley Fiomona for the role of Robert?

I was looking for a young person who could sing. I pulled together a team of young Central Africans passionate about cinema—Débonnaire Mbomba Wanguin, Emmanuella Lalanga—and we started searching, first among young Congolese refugees living in Bangui, then among young musicians, before quickly widening the net to include all of Bangui's youth. Aline Dalbis, a casting director specializing in street casting, came on board for a while to share her expertise and help train the team. We searched every neighborhood in Bangui—stadiums, cultural venues popular with young people, playgrounds, and of course schools. I met over 700 young people from different parts of the city; some had heard about the casting call on the radio, others on Facebook. But Robert was nowhere to be found...

Then, Bradley appeared. He was fairly shy and couldn't stay for long. He told me he'd love to be in the film, that he often sang in his room at home, but that his father wouldn't hear anything about it. That reminded me of Robert's relationship with his





father. His face lit up when he talked. We tried a few improvisations, and Bradley had a presence, a personality unlike any of the other young people I'd met before—but he couldn't really sing. As we say back home in the Central African Republic: God doesn't give you everything!

How did you work with him?

Along with rehearsing for the role, Bradley had to learn how to sing and work a stage. That was the steepest challenge for him. We put in a lot of time together, but he picked things up quickly. After two weeks of intensive work on my compositions, we went into the studio to record the concert songs. During rehearsals, I'd explain the idea behind the scene—the situation, the emotion I was after—then step back and let him take over the space, use his own words, and move on instinct. It was only after he finished that we'd debrief: I'd point out what was working and what needed attention, and then we'd go again.

How did the shoot go?

How did you go about building your team?

We rented a large villa where we all lived together, cast and crew alike. Every night there was singing and dancing—a truly joyful atmosphere. That gave

me the chance to get really close to Bradley and the four young actors playing Daniel, Espérance, Aurélie, and Jacqueline. I'd wake them up in the morning to get ready for the shoot. We'd eat together, talk about anything and everything. They're like family to me now.

Filmmaking expertise in the Central African Republic is still fairly limited, so I put a mixed team together. Five young French technicians came on board alongside fifteen young Central African filmmaking enthusiasts, most of them graduates of CinéBangui—a short-lived film school that ran from 2020 to 2022, training young people in film production. And I couldn't forget Séverin Ambako, a friend from the military and longtime personal security detail who stepped up as production manager. Everyone invested in the project as if it were their own. They gave it so much love—it was beautiful.

What were the main challenges during the shoot?

Bangui isn't used to film crews yet. We'd often get crowds gathering in the street making lots of noise, which meant real headaches for sound. For certain sequences, like the militia attack at the market during the musical number, we'd planned for around

thirty extras—but we ended up with a hundred people who'd come in from neighboring districts. Word travels fast in Bangui. Everyone wanted to be in the film; they pushed their way in, and we were getting camera looks everywhere. Even so, for my next projects, I'd love to go back and blend into that crowd that arrives so unexpectedly. The presence of white crew members attracted curiosity to the point where, on one occasion, I had to send the French team off set entirely and shoot it myself with only the Central Africans there. But the camera was nothing like the one I use for my documentaries. There was a lot of sun, so I couldn't see a thing, and my shots were coming out crooked. Luckily, people eventually lost interest and we were able to pick up again with the whole crew.

I'd often ask my godobé friends—children who grew up on the streets—to help keep the street in check. And then there were the police—the director of photography, the first assistant director, and I got stopped three times. We had the Ministry of Arts and Culture permit, but the officers didn't want to hear it. Fortunately, as they say in Bangui: everything is possible and everything works out in the end. My Central African friends were a huge help.

How did you approach the mise en scène and cinematography?

For my documentary *We, Students!*, I handled the cinematography myself. For *Congo Boy*, I chose to work with a DP who had an extensive background in music videos—Adrien Lallau. He's used to shooting with performers and fluent with handheld work. On set, we worked as a genuine unit. Rather than staying behind a remote monitor, I was right there next to him the whole time. We prepared everything together: how to frame, how to move with the actors—and he'd adjust the light around the movement I wanted. A lot of it was instinct: we'd improvise on the fly, just the two of us, and only bring the rest of the crew in on the idea at the last minute.

You composed all the songs in *Congo Boy*—how do you see the role of music in the film?

I was a singer before I was a filmmaker—music has always been a part of my life. I sing when I'm happy, and I sing when I'm sad, too. In *Congo Boy*, as in real life, music lets me breathe, lets me smile. Music saved me. It's my strength.

"*Guigui*" is one of my earliest compositions, from 2013. I rewrote and adapted it for Bradley. I composed "*Atalaku*" on location, during rehearsals with Bradley, and refined the melody and lyrics that evening to capture the atmosphere I often hear in





Central African clubs. For the last song, I searched for a long time to find something that matched the film. I wrote "*Mama ti kondo*"—"La Mère Poule"—in Brittany, near the end of writing the screenplay. I was swimming in the sea and found myself humming a tune. That evening, I wrote the lyrics in one go and sent them to my co-writers. I knew the film had to end with a tribute to the Central African Republic—my adoptive country, where I grew up, my *mère poule*. In the editing room, I'd often sing quietly when I was hungry, and César Simonot, the editor, suggested weaving those songs into the film, as I had done in *We, Students!* We laid my voice over the images first, then sent everything to Bradley. I coached him over the phone from Paris, and he recorded his vocals in Bangui.

What would you like audiences to take away from your film?

When people talk about refugees, they usually think of people coming to seek asylum in Europe. But there are also hundreds of thousands of refugees who leave one African country for another. That's the reality for many Congolese, for example.

I'm a refugee myself, and I'd like people to look at young refugees differently. Refugees aren't beggars. Robert is a young man fighting for his

family—a true soldier of life. But more than that: a refugee can have dreams. That's what I want people to take away from Robert's story. War, the madness of this world, means that many young refugees can't fulfill their dreams the way other young people around the world can. That's what I lived through, and what I want to share—which is why, even though the film is sometimes hard to watch, it moves toward the light. It carries hope. ●





BIOGRAPHY OF RAFIKI FARIALA

Born in 1997 in Uvira, Kivu (DRC), Farijala Alolea Albert arrived as a young child in the Central African Republic, where his parents had sought refuge due to the war. He began singing at a very early age. In 2013, he recorded his very first track, *Je Suis Élève*, which became a hit, and adopted his stage name: Rafiki - Rh2o. He discovered filmmaking in 2017 during a documentary course organised by Ateliers Varan in Bangui. Alongside his economics studies at the University of Bangui (graduating with a bachelor's degree and a Master's in Human Resources Management), he directed *We, Students!* a feature-length documentary selected for the 2022 Berlinale (Panorama section) which won numerous awards in festivals (two awards at Cinéma du Réel in Paris, and awards in Milan, Tarifa, Lisbon, Carthage, Fespaco). *Congo Boy* is his first feature film. ●



CONTEXT

Congo Boy references two conflicts:

The hero's parents, like the director's own, are Congolese refugees. In 1997, they fled the war ravaging the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo and took refuge in the Central African Republic, a country that seemed safe at the time.

Unfortunately, fifteen years later, the Central African Republic descended into a cycle of violence that culminated in 2013–2014, when the Séléka rebel coalition seized power in Bangui and rival militias, the Anti-balaka, fought them for control of the capital.

It was then that Rafiki Fariala's parents tried to flee the country, forged documents to cross the border, and were thrown into prison—leaving their son to fend for the family.

We know the story. Rafiki tells it in his film.

In 2016, a new president was elected and the situation in the country stabilized. In 2017, at the initiative of Boris Lojkine—who had come to the Central African Republic to prepare his film *Camille*—the Ateliers Varan organized a documentary filmmaking workshop: ten young Central Africans made

ten short documentary films. Rafiki Fariala was among them. The experience was repeated in 2018. In 2019, the original workshop leaders, Boris Lojkine & Daniele Incalcaterra, joined forces with the most advanced filmmaker in the group, Elvis Sabin Ngaibino, to create Makongo Films, which went on to produce Rafiki Fariala's feature *We, Students!*, presented at the Berlinale in 2021.

Between 2020 and 2022, CinéBangui was established—a short-lived film school (it would train only one cohort, for lack of sustainable funding) that gave twenty-five young Central Africans a grounding in the filmmaking trades: cinematography, sound, editing, production, and screenwriting. Many of these graduates appear in the credits of *Congo Boy*.

In a country that had no movie theaters, no film production companies, no trained technicians, and no directors, a new generation is beginning to make films again.

More than twenty years after *The Silence of the Forest* (Directors' Fortnight, 2003), *Congo Boy* is the first fiction feature of this new Central African cinema. ●



CAST

ROBERT

Bradley Fiomona

ESPÉRANCE

Christy Djomanda Louba

DANIEL

Pétruche Mbomba

AURÉLIE

Rosiana Kotozia

JACQUELINE

Gloria Ambacko

CÉSAR

Dieufera Sana

SARAPATA

Carlos Suffisant Djihoro

DKZ

David Ningando

THE FATHER

Hubert Ngbolo

ZARA

Zara Lucie Dobo

THE COLONEL

Bossoro-Kiabale

THE MOTHER

Berthe Ngbolo

100\$

Miguel Mbiguimale

SHOWRUNNER

Blessing Diaba

HERMINE

Ludmila Fada

VEYZO

Eudes Gadzo "Veyzo"

KMJ

Archippe Marvine
Japhet Koundjia "KMJ"

CREW PARTNERS

DIRECTOR

Rafiki Fariala

WRITERS

Rafiki Fariala & Tommy Baron

SCRIPT COLLABORATION

Boris Lojkine

PRODUCERS

Boris Lojkine
Elvis Sabin Ngaïbino
Daniele Incalcaterra

CO-PRODUCERS

Caroline Nataf
Dieudo Hamadi
Marco Bechis

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Adrien Lallau

GAFFER

Tony Ballu

COLOR GRADING

Angelo Francavilla

FIRST ASSISTANT DIRECTOR

Tommy Baron

CASTING

Aline Dalbis

EXTRAS MANAGER

Débonnaire Mbomba
Wanguin

COSTUME DESIGNER

Raïhanatou Ibrahim

EDITING

César Simonot

EDITING COLLABORATION

Xavier Sirven

SOUND

Ari Cuffini-Fabre
Aaron Koyassoukpenko
Martinez Faïmon
Tiphaine Depret
Solen Chouvet
Cristiano Ciccone

ORIGINAL MUSIC

Rafiki Fariala
Lillo Morealle

SONGS

Rafiki Fariala

LOCATION MANAGER

Séverin Ambako

PRODUCTION MANAGER

Noémie Colin

POST-PRODUCTION MANAGER

Romain Gaillard

STUDIO MIX / COLOR GRADING / VFX

Laser Films

PRODUCTION COMPANIES

Makongo Films (RCA)
Unité (FR)
Kiripifilms (RDC)
Karta Film (IT)

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Canal +

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