

Wrong Men
Present
In co-production with Tosala Films, New Amsterdam, Special Touch Studios,
Serendipity, RadicalMedia, Big World Cinema

OMEN

a film by Baloji



Belgium, Netherlands, Democratic Republic of Congo / 90 min / 1.5 / 5.1

Swiss Press

SUPERMARKET
Christian Ströhle
christian@super-market.ch
+41 79 390 47 69

Swiss Distribution

OUTSIDE THE BOX
Chemin du Martinet 28
1007 Lausanne
+41 21 635 14 34
info@outside-thebox.ch
www.outside-thebox.ch



SYNOPSIS

Following Koffi's return to his birthplace after he has been ostracized by his family, 'Omen' explores the weight of beliefs on one's destiny through four characters accused of being witches and sorcerers, all of them intertwined and guiding each other into the phantasmagoria of Africa.



DIRECTOR'S INTERVIEW

Omen tells the intertwining story of four Congolese characters who are labeled as witches. Why did you choose this topic?

In Swahili, my name Baloji means "sorcerer", or even "sorcerer who can take all the other sorcerers' powers". It's an awful name, really. It's like being named "Devil" or "Demon" in Belgium. So because of my name, and because people used to label me as a sorcerer, I've always been fascinated by witchcraft, and by people who are seen as different. That's why Koffi, the main character in the movie, has a port-wine stain on his face: I wanted to visualize the weight of that label.

Why did you decide to focus on several characters, rather than just one protagonist?

I wanted to show different forms of assignation, in order to approach the subject in a larger way. For a woman like Tshala, being labeled a witch is a bigger burden than for a man. For an older woman like Mujila, it's even worse. That was one of the most important things I wanted to show: how society is structured for men, and how they try to control women's bodies. What happens when a young girl doesn't want to have kids. Or how a woman gets completely discarded when she grows old. I've been studying feminism a lot. I think that's my obligation, because as a man, I'm part of the problem. And part of the solution as well. In the same way that racism is a white people's issue: it can't be solved unless white people start talking about it.

Paco, one of the main characters, is a young boy who is also considered a sorcerer.

When parents have money issues, it's sometimes believed to be the fault of their youngest children, who have supposedly cursed the family. In these cases, the parents often send these kids away, and they end up on the streets. This is what happened to Paco. But he deals with his assignation in a very different way than Koffi, who is ashamed and thinks it's the worst thing that ever happened to him. Paco has learned to use it to his advantage: he does magic tricks and scares people. He takes a certain pride in his assignation.

Does that mirror your own attitude? As a kid, you were called a sorcerer. Now, you make movies - which you could call magic tricks too.

Yes, I've finally accepted that maybe my name is also what I am. In Congo, I learned that originally, my name means "man of science", so it comes from something positive. It wasn't until colonialism came into the picture that the word "baloji" turned into something negative. So now I can deal with it. And when I started making movies, I decided to put some magical realism into them. It's part of me, so it must be part of my cinema language.

You've done so many different things in your life: you worked as a fruit picker, you were part of successful Belgian hip-hop group Starflam, you've acted... When did you start dreaming of becoming a film director?

From 1998 to 2006, I lived above a music and video store in Brussels. Every day, I would go pick up my mail downstairs, and start talking about movies with the guys

who hung around in the store. They made me discover films like Gus Van Sant's *Gerry*, that had a very different rhythm to them. That was my film school. For years, I would watch a movie every day. And since I was already very interested in music, fashion and art direction, film felt like the perfect fit for me, because it combined all of my passions into one art form.

How did you create the music for *Omen*?

Very early on in the process, I realized the music I usually make as a recording artist wouldn't fit the film. My music always has vocals, but in this film they would just be too much. There is already a lot of information in the image. So I kept the music in the film quite subtle. But then I also recorded four albums with songs that wouldn't appear in the film. (laughs)

What was the purpose of these albums?

Each album is written from a different character's point of view. It was a great opportunity to create backstory for the characters, which could help the actors. But mostly, it was an exercise in empathy for me. It made me love and understand each one of my characters. For example, Tshala's album is all about female sexuality. As a man, it took me a lot of reading and studying to really be able to understand the dynamics at play.

Could you talk about the use of color in *Omen*?

I have synesthesia. To me, everything is connected to color. Sounds, moods... They all have colors in my head. And so every character in the movie also has their own color: for Koffi, it's dark red - like his port-wine stain. Paco is associated with pink, etc. You can see it in the typeface I used to present their names on screen, but also in the color filters we used. And in the music too: for each album, I only used chords that I felt were connected to certain colors. Sometimes synesthesia feels like a disease, but I try to have fun with it.

Together with Elke Hoste, you also designed the costumes for the film. They blend elements from different cultures.

I wanted to create a cultural triangle. There are obviously lots of elements from Central Africa, but there's also an influence from American heritage: the costumes in the parade are inspired by Mardi Gras - we actually went to New Orleans to create the masks. But we also took inspiration from the "Gilles", the famous folklore characters who appear in the carnival parade of Binche in Belgium. I also used Belgian surrealist painters like Magritte as an influence, for example in the opening and closing scenes.

What does it mean for you to be able to come to Cannes with your first feature film?

I think it's important, in the sense that people will finally see me as a filmmaker now. Because I'm a musician, for a long time I wasn't taken seriously as a director. I wasn't part of the "film family". So a lot of people in the industry and the press were very surprised when my film got selected for Cannes. I hope that will change now.

DIRECTOR - Baloji

Born in 1978 in Lubumbashi (Democratic Republic of Congo) and based in Belgium, Baloji (not to be confused with the photographer Sammy Baloji) is an award-winning musician, filmmaker, a polymath artist, he's working as art director, costume designer for fashion and other visual art forms.

Baloji name meaning refers to occult and evil forces. In Swahili, it initially meant "man of science," but in colonial times, it turned into "man of occult sciences/sorcerer". This assignment has influenced his entire work as a heavy burden to bear and, at the same time, as a driver for a playful and empirical approach, shaping his vision with an imaginary suspended between oneiric and magical realism, notably through a work on the mask and the symbolisms and its report of association of colors and sound caused by its synesthesia.

As a filmmaker, Baloji released his first feature film *AUGURE / OMEN* (Cannes official selection 2023) accompanied by a four-part soundtrack where each record is written from the point of view of the main characters. The project is also accompanied by a traveling exhibition project featuring the costume designs and photos of the project.

The film *OMEN* follows several short films noticed in the circuit and distributed worldwide such as *ZOMBIES* (London FF).

As a musician, Baloji has released two critically acclaimed albums and two EPs/the latest "Avenue Kaniama" on Bella Union Records (Father John Mistry, Fleet Foxes).



FILMOGRAPHY

2023 - OMEN, Writer & Director
Cannes Un Certain Regard

2019 - ZOMBIES (short), Writer & Director
London Film Festival / Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Festival / Mubi Awards - Best Short Film

2018 - PEAU DE CHAGRIN, BLEU DE NUIT (short), Writer & Director
Clermont-Ferrand Short Film Festival

CREW

Director, Screenwriter	Baloji
Image	Joaquim Philippe
Sound	Jan Deca, Erik Griekspoor, Danny Van Spreuwel
Production design	Eve Martin
Costumes	Elke Hoste , Baloji
Hair & make up	Lila Vander Elst
Editing	Bruno Tracq, Bertrand Conard
Music Composer	Liesa Van der Aa
Producer	Benoit Roland

CAST

Koffi	Marc Zinga
Alice	Lucie Debay
Tshala	Eliane Umuhire
Mama Mujila	Yves-Marina Gnahoua
Paco	Marcel Otete Kabeya