

MINIMALS IN A TITANIC WORLD

Director Philbert Aimé Mbabazi Sharangabo

Rwanda, Germany, Cameroon | 2025
85 min. | Kinyarwanda with English subtitles

Screenplay Philbert Aime Mbabazi Sharangabo. **Cinematography** Samuel Ishimwe Karemangingo, Nasser Naizi. **Editing** Kivu Ruhorahoza. **Music** Amin Goudarzi. **Sound Design** Amadou Massaer Ndiaye. **Sound** Nshimiyimana Jean Bosco. **Production Design** Carine Umunyana. **Costumes** Mizero Kabano Yannick. **Make-Up** Nzasangamariya Amandine. **Casting** Ryumugabe Remy. **Producers** Philbert Aimé Mbabazi Sharangabo, Samuel Ishimwe Karemangingo, Remy Ryumugabe, Didacienne Nibagwire, Alexander Wadouh, Roxana Richters, Augustine Moukodi. **Production company** Imitana Productions (Kigali, Ruanda). **With** Aline Amike, Niyigena "Rwasibo Joe" Jean Pierre, Ganza Moise, Nasser Makala, Alice Amike.

World sales Imitana Productions.

Synopsis

Let off with a warning for aggression, dancer and aspiring musician Anita returns from prison to perform at her bar, where she learns about the sudden death of her boyfriend, Serge. While close friends process the shock, Anita finds solace in the company of Serge's roommate, Shema. As she wrestles with the difficult final memories of her boyfriend, Anita must negotiate her bond with Shema while trying to break out on her own as an independent songwriter. Set in current-day Kigali, Philbert Aimé Mbabazi Sharangabo's radiant, richly detailed feature debut trains its attention on a generation of upwardly mobile youth grappling with anxieties around love, death and self-actualization. With grace and generosity, he allows his characters to float about in a state of flux, not knowing what they want or can dare to. Despite our intimacy with her dreams and frustrations, Anita retains her essential spiritual mystery, her response to grief and bereavement never explained away. With keen attention to colours, textures, music and moods, **MINIMALS IN A TITANIC WORLD** crafts an emotionally resonant portrait of friendship frayed by the weight of loss. (Srikanth Srinivasan)

Philbert Aimé Mbabazi Sharangabo is a graduate of the cinema department of HEAD-Genève. His short **I GOT MY THINGS AND LEFT** won the Grand Prize at the 2019 International Short Film Festival Oberhausen. He has made a dozen short films that have screened at over 50 film festivals worldwide including IFF Rotterdam, Visions du Réel, Oberhausen, and Tampere Film Festival. He is a Berlinale Talents, Locarno Filmmakers Academy, and Torino Film Lab alumni. The International Short Film Festival Oberhausen dedicated a retrospective to his work in 2020. **MINIMALS IN A TITANIC WORLD** is his first feature.

Films: 2014: City Dropout (short film). 2016: The Liberators (short

film), Versus (short film). 2018: Keza Lyn (short film), I Got My Things and Left (short film). 2025: **Minimals in a Titanic World**.

Director's Statement

Coming to Terms with Loss

Exploring themes of freedom, self-discovery and chosen family with a small crew and documentary means

When is the right time to move on from a loss? Two people, linked by a deceased dear friend, find it difficult to give in to the forces that pull them together while mourning their loved one.

MINIMALS IN A TITANIC WORLD is a continuation of my short film **I GOT MY THINGS AND LEFT**.

Produced with the means at hand, it was shot with urgency by its entire Kigali team, not waiting for the perfect opportunity to be handed to them. Rather than being a film with a grand theme, **MINIMALS** is a portrait of young people affected by the loss of their loved one while searching for the purpose of their existence and driven by a resilient spirit.

At the heart of the film is a love story between two people who find it difficult to love each other as they mourn the death of their dear friend, whose shadow hangs over them.

The essence of the film is also inspired by the spirit of a famous Zimbabwean writer, the late Dambudzo Marechera, who died young, but lived a singular life detached from the trends of his time, even though his life was firmly rooted in them.

In my film, young people take the lead and allow themselves to question the world around them. In this respect, I explore and deepen the same themes as in my previous short film: individual freedom and the process of self-discovery, chosen family and religion.

The film was made by a small crew in the style of a documentary production. The cast is a mix of professional and non-professional actors.

Philbert Aimé Mbabazi Sharangabo

Interview

Elective Affinities

Philbert Aimé Mbabazi Sharangabo talks to Christiane Büchner and Barbara Wurm about low-budget filmmaking in Rwanda and depicting mourning on screen

Barbara Wurm: We are extremely happy and proud to have your film in our program. You were successful in international festivals with your short films – what was it like to make a feature length debut?

Philbert Aimé Mbabazi: I always felt like I wanted to make my first feature before I turned 30. But then things went differently. I gained experience with shooting and producing short films. I've made 12 short films, including four while studying film in Geneva. But to say I'm going to greenlight myself and make a feature film is also a totally different economy. It was a different beast. I wanted to make it with friends and people I had always worked with here. In the end it was also fulfilling because we felt like we had to do it because we so much wanted to tell this story, which also was inspired by a short film that we had worked on together. So at the same time it felt like a continuation of a process.

Christiane Büchner: What was difficult about this project?

PAM: I had a project taking place in Switzerland when I was still living there. It was advancing very well. But in 2020, I had to move back to Rwanda in the middle of COVID. The Swiss project couldn't continue because I was not a Swiss resident anymore. It's almost impossible for an African filmmaker who doesn't live in Europe to make a film set in Europe. So I went home to a place where I had always shot my films and we started to develop it. I guess most of the challenges were also due to COVID because in Rwanda we have an emerging industry, which was shut down in 2020 and 2021. We had to keep in mind that the project would need a minimalist dimension because we would be shooting it without spending five years searching for funding. It was clear that we were going to shoot this with no producers attached. So we designed our own process of how we would shoot.

BW: You spoke about solace and the solidarity of your friends. And now you've mentioned minimalism. And both aspects end up in your film. That there is a small community of people, a kind of chosen family that is dealing with loss and other heavy topics. Maybe you can tell us something about the connection of your own perception of your life and why you wanted to transfer it to film?

PAM: I think characters or people in general are marked by so many things they have gone through, but this is not where they end. People are more than just the circumstances they have lived through. In my films, I'm always trying to look at characters who are bigger than their circumstances. Their life might not be epic, but they aspire to something. And something that is not just pure survival. I want to elevate the characters and shine more light on them. Because this is something that has always concerned me. When I was studying in Europe, I saw many stories about immigrants in 2015/16, and even people from my film school dealt with this topic in their thesis films. But I don't like films where you go out and people are saying, like, sorry, you suffered. Okay, you might have suffered, but you're not just your sufferings, you are more than that. When I don't have that, then I cannot make a film about a character, because that would be very limiting.

CB: I saw some of your short films and I find recurring topics. In I GOT MY THINGS AND LEFT, you also show a group mourning, where their memory of the deceased is handed over from one person to the next. Why is this ritual so important to you?

PAM: In the shot at the graveyard, the idea was to go away from the usual wake and burial function. Usually, the biological family and the older people guide it. The idea was, let's have friends, people who knew this person closely, the closest people to the deceased, remember this person. I invited older people and the religion to take over. The non-biological family stays. How do they handle this person's memory? They don't understand the person's death. But at least it's not ceremonial, it's not too formal. Now it's human beings who know this person. Anita is sort of the newcomer to the group. She's the least used to them, but she was also very important to the deceased.

BW: Could you tell us what it was like working with your amazing actress, Alina Amike? I have rarely seen such a wonderful appearance.

PAM: We first met on a friend's set. A film called FATHER'S DAY directed by Kivu Ruhorahoza. When we met, she had to drive a car and the director had chosen my old Land Rover for her to drive. I had to do the stunt for the driving scenes. Originally, I was considering a different actress, because Alina was going to be at the Berlinale with Kiva's film until 28 February. And we started shooting on 1 March. There seemed to be no way she could be the lead actress in the film and I explored other options. But I was not convinced and I had to tell her at the last minute: 'You're going to arrive in Kigali and two days later you're going to be shooting for 30 days as the lead actress.' I didn't regret that decision. First of all, she is very motivated. You feel that you are actually making a film with her. It's not just about giving her direction. We would talk and take our real-life experiences into account. She is also someone who understands different ways of life and different social classes. She was one of my closest collaborators on the film. And we also used some of the elements of the work she does. In the scene in which she becomes a guardian angel, she's wearing pearls that she made herself. She's still very young and now she's studying acting in Berlin.

BW: Do you mix professional actors with non-professionals?

PAM: Here we have a lot of series that go through YouTube channels. That is where you find actors. But it's another type of directing and they have a different relationship to cinema. There were so many people who came to the casting, who wanted to be part of the film and would even come back as extras. I think Aline was one of the most experienced. In the wedding scenes, you have a lot of people who were part of some series and sometimes they had even had bigger roles in the series but they were ready to be extras to be part of the project.

CB: Music also plays a big role in the story. I remember some lines: 'You left me with a story' or 'Choose not to change today', 'Show off to my peers.' Tell us more about the music in your film.

PAM: Music is central to the film because the main character aspires to become a musician, but the job that she's doing also involves a lot of music. So we had three different types of music. First, we have the music that is sung in the bars. In these kinds of bars in Kigali, they have Rwandese music, but they also play a lot of Nigerian music. We went with the Rwandese music, because of rights issues that could come later. But I love every single song that is in there. Sometimes there are songs that came out in the early 2000s when modern Rwandese music started, R'n'B and everything. They came to Rwanda because we always listen to the American R'n'B and pop, but only in the 2000s did we start having artists doing hip hop, doing R'n'B, and pop. The songs Aline sings were written by a musician named Waya Viatora. She's a Rwandan artist who is sort of alternative. She's not famous nationally, but if all goes well, she'll be traveling with us to Berlin, too. We're trying to be a big delegation. And then you also have music that was composed by a composer. But that was more in the final phases. It's actually a film packed with music. And sometimes I think, maybe we put in a little bit too much music. But it's out of love.

CB: You used the term 'chosen family', but it's also a chosen generation. The only people from another generation not yet born or not important. Ganza Moise, who is also a filmmaker you've produced, acts in the film. Is your work part of a generation raised within film around you?

PAM: Yes, definitely. Sometimes it's all mixes. Every time I go to tell Ganza, 'you'll be in my film', he insists that he's not an actor because he hasn't been in other films. But for me, it's not about performances. It's really about presence, about having a presence. And also, as you say, people end up in my films less through the casting sessions, but more through encounters. It's more about proximity, entourage, and the people you meet and how they end up being collaborators in the films you make. With

Aline, one of the things we share is music. We exchange a lot of songs. We both particularly like Lana Del Ray. So we exchanged a lot of her songs. And we were like 'Have you heard this?' 'No, I've never heard this. Actually, this is really interesting.' The lyrics and everything. It's really about an encounter, but the proximity which ends up also in collaboration and in films. There is no film school here. You say you want to make a film, so what does that mean? I refused to go to the university. That looked really crazy, especially when you're not bad at school. It doesn't make sense to some people that you wouldn't continue school. But meeting those kinds of people, such as Remy, who was ready to study pharmacy at the National University. He was brilliant, but he also wanted to make films. And meeting like-minded people with whom we've been working for the last 15 years also keeps you working and you become career companions. I think this plays a big role in continuing to make films in places where there is no certainty. And finding these companions keeps you motivated and keeps you making what you love. And also, it's people who understand how tough it's been and with whom you share big moments when they come. And this is why I say we're coming to Berlin with 8 or 10 people. Because it's a defining moment for us that keeps us going.

CB: You don't seem to need a straight plot in your film. Serge dies, but for the longest time, we don't have a clue why. We focus on everything around his death. How did you develop this narrative?

PAM: I went to a residency to write a script. But the script was always coming in bits and pieces and it was about moments and scenes. I never had an urge to have a classical structure for the movie. The first thing for me is the character and what they are going through. It's not always linear and a logical succession of scenes. Whatever I wrote, I deconstructed it in the shooting and in the editing even more. Because this stream is really centred on the character of Anita, I wanted to recount different pieces of her life. The structure was not important.

BW: What supports this narrative structure are the spaces that are so elegantly defined by colours, specific light and the framing. Can you comment on this more visual aspect of your choices?

PAM: Yes, spaces are very important for us. The idea was, with a group of people I know: 'Let's find a place where we can make a film.' When we found this house, it was clear that the house would figure in 70 percent of the film. It would be our own studio where we would craft the film. The idea was for most of us to move into that house and live in it for 30 days, for us to inhabit this house. We had a script that we threw away and we had a lot of notes. Every day was a creative process. Because it was not like we're going to shoot that scene where this happened. We were creating together. This is why the actors, and especially Aline, were a big part of this. Everyone had their room. It was their room in the film and it was also the room where they stayed at night. The second most important place is the bar where Anita works. And this is a bar we've been going to since 2015 – me and the producer. We used to go there. Not because we were going to make a film about the bar, but because we liked hanging out there. The place has constantly been changing over the years. Every time you go there, it's different. Last time you entered by a door here. Now the door is closed. The door is over there. When you come, there is a kind of mezzanine. Is it strong enough? Is it going to fall down on people? Even during the two shoots, it changed again. I think spaces and people are at the heart of a film. The rest becomes a collective experience. There is a whole idealistic thing for us in making a film because we don't have producers putting pressure on us. We don't have so many strings attached. We might as well enjoy the process and shape it our way.

BW: But the sequences are already in your head. Or do you change a lot at the editing table?

PAM: It's maybe fifty-fifty. I've edited a lot of my own work. I really love editing. Sometimes, I love removing the right sound and placing a different sound with a different image or changing the rhythm of a shot. So I like that the editing room becomes an experimentation in itself. But I do write. It's not always complete scenes. It can be notes. To enter a scene, we have to make it happen. It's written in notes.

CB: Your film has a group of people mourning and they enjoy being comforted by the group. And then there is this scene where a baby is supposed to be named after the deceased Serge, and Anita is fighting for the child's right not to be burdened with the name of a deceased person. For me, this is the theme of the whole film in a way. What do we pass on?

PAM: Yeah, that's interesting. For me, something that is very interesting is that even though there is a group, it's the role of individuals. In Rwanda, we have a very conformist society. And for me, the world of individuals in a society is interesting. Can you assert yourself as a person? For example, the whole act of me saying, I'm going to make films, is like... I stopped going with the flow and said, wait, I'm going to be more intentional with what I want to do with my life. For me, it's very interesting when a person asserts themselves in a group. Many people try to avoid that. I'm always trying to find individuals who can do things differently. Also, for my film, to propose alternative realities. I'm not only going by what people do when there is a funeral, I'm also trying to imagine something else. So it's the idea of what do we pass on and what do we keep.

BW: Where do you see it yourself on the world map of cinema? How is this film positioned? Is it linked to anyone specific?

PAM: Even though I went to film school, my initial film education was just being someone who consumes movies and who watches things from different parts of the world and realising how free cinema can be. And also, a lot of short films. I've always loved short films. Maybe it still influences me that I made twelve short films and have only now made my first feature. Because it was not a thing that was so much part of the industry, where you do labs and get people working on the script with you. The cinema I like always involves experimenting with things. I wouldn't know where to situate my film. I hope I'll situate it as I go along. I've been with it too much. I'm waiting to see it on the big screen, too, and watch it to the end as a spectator.

BW: I don't feel any of the gravity that I feel in many other films. Instead, there is a weightlessness or lightness of a certain generation, maybe its attitude. Is it easier to treat loss in lighter way?

PAM: There's something else about how people approach death in the film. I mean, Rwanda is a country that had a genocide and the whole thing of mourning every year during April Moon. But at the same time, Rwandans are people who hide their emotions and they swallow a lot. They are not so expressive with their emotions and find ways to turn around them. If you look at the neighbouring country, Congo, when somebody dies there, they even hire people who come to cry. People are concealed here. At the same time, as a filmmaker, I don't want to be too frontal with death. I want to find a lighter, a less direct way to deal with it.

BW: How big was your budget?

PAM: When we shot, we had 30,000 euros and everybody got paid. The idea was, we're not going to do a film again. People did favours for us, but we were not going to do that when we asked people to give us 30 days for free. So we paid people. We shot 80 percent of the movie and raised 15,000 euros more. We shot the remaining 20 percent about 10 months later. And then in post-production, that's where things were a bit expensive because we went to do it in Dakar. There's this place called Santa Inenga. It was initiated by Alain Gomis – who also had one of his last films

in Berlin (REWIND & PLAY, 2022) – for African filmmakers to have an option of doing their post-production in Africa. Because most films do their post in Europe. I think maybe we reached 150,000 with the post-production because it was done outside the country.

BW: And the next project is going to be your second feature or another ten shorts 'in between'?

PAM: I love making shorts! So I'm going to do a few shorts before I do my next feature. But I hope in less than ten years, maybe three, maybe four.

BW: Ok, then let's hope we'll be around still at Forum, so we can roll the red carpet out for you!