

Loli & Rex

presents

THEMBA



a film by Elinor Burkett and Errol Webber

(USA/Zimbabwe, 2010, 72 minutes)

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SYNOPSIS

Imagine a country where more people die of AIDS, malnutrition and lack of medical care each week than are killed in Afghanistan, Iraq or Darfur. Where hospitals operate without doctors, urban neighborhoods suffer months without water, and unemployment tops 90 percent. Then imagine navigating that country from a wheelchair, without functioning hands, or with some other disability in a culture where the disabled are seen as cursed. You don't have to imagine. *iThemba* takes you there in a rich, verite tapestry about the band Liyana, eight edgy young musicians who negotiate their country's chaotic political waters, economic collapse and deep-seated prejudices with humor and grit.

ABOUT THE FILM

iThemba is the tale of the most unlikely of garage bands: Liyana marks its rhythms and lays down its melodies with marimbas and traditional drums instead of electric guitars and basses. The lead singers never prance across the stage because they are unable to walk. Since their neighbors consider them cursed, their audiences are usually sparse.

But *iThemba* is not another demoralizing documentary about Africa, an overly familiar tale of woe. Rather, this film, rife with the unexpected, is a funny, poignant narrative about eight compelling young people who refuse to succumb to the stigma of disability or the collapse of their country.

Watch lead singer Prudence Mabhena, legless and palsied, grapple with memories of the grandmother who'd urged her parents to let her die. Meet 90-pound Marvelous Mbulo, the band's self-styled *bad boy* and ladies' man, who constantly plots how to keep his current flame without giving up his "options". Travel the city with Energy Maburutse, who tries to live up to his name as he pounds his marimba. But he's in constant pain since his frame stopped growing, but his organs did not.

And listen to the endless flow of satire and the amazing Afro-fusion melodies that make you forget about the musicians' twisted limbs.

These unique young people guide *iThemba's* viewers into Zimbabwean villages and cities, to rural bottle shops and urban marketplaces, inside the huts of traditional healers and the neighborhoods of the urban poor - into an Africa rarely seen by outsiders, a place where tradition is not necessarily gentle, where it threatens to trap the unfortunate and where a few are fighting back.

Shot during the 2008 Zimbabwean presidential election and the country's economic meltdown, *iThemba* unfolds against the backdrop of political tensions and the daily struggle to find a bank that actually had cash, to buy food although store shelves were empty, and to navigate streets pocked with wheelchair-mangling potholes.

iThemba was conceived, shot and edited by a Jamaican, American, and Zimbabwean team.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

I've long been drawn to stories of "outsiders," men and women confined by culture and tradition to the social margins. And when I moved to Zimbabwe in 2005 and met the members of Liyana, I knew I had found yet another such compelling tale, all the richer because these young musicians cringe at any sign of pity. It's respect they crave, and they evoke it with talent and resilience. They humbled me. I needed to introduce them to an international audience.

All too frequently, documentaries about Africa feel as if they are shot from the outside looking in, leaving viewers with the sense that the Africans they meet are "other." I was intent on avoiding that distance by building intimacy between viewers and the band members – indeed, between viewers and Zimbabwe. After three years living in Africa, I understood that the problem was race; skin color forges a nearly invisible barrier that outsiders rarely recognize. I needed to find a black cameraman, and I was extremely fortunate to enlist Errol Webber, an extraordinary Jamaican-American cinematographer whom the musicians immediately adopted.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Shooting was a constant challenge. The electricity had a pesky tendency to shut down just as we were transferring footage or charging dead batteries. During the eight months we filmed, food was available only on the black market or across the border in Botswana. A cholera epidemic and election violence provoked panic back home, there was no gas at the pumps, and wherever we traveled, people grew nervous at the sight of the camera, worried that in that contentious political climate, we might spell trouble.

We learned to keep track of which of our friends had electricity when we did not – and to rely on the generosity of strangers. We discovered how chickens doled out to Paramount chiefs and loaves of bread to lesser luminaries could ease our passage, and we plotted a dozen shooting strategies that kept us off the streets. And we received enormous help both from King George VI Centre for Disabled Children and the National University of Science and Technology in mollifying the authorities. Despite these difficulties, we kept laughing, infected by the members of Liyana, who cope with everything from political turmoil to overt discrimination with deliciously dark humor and gracious aplomb.

A NOTE ON DISABILITIES IN ZIMBABWE

Traditional Zimbabwean attitudes toward disabilities are intertwined with long-held beliefs about the power of ancestral spirits and witches. The birth of a child with a disability was long viewed either as a punishment by the spirits for wrongs committed by the child's family or a sign that another family had invoked the power of witchcraft to steal the energy of the child or clan. So many families viewed a disability as sign of their disgrace and hid their disabled children away to avoid public shame. Although those attitudes have evolved under the influence of education and westernization, fear of people with disabilities remains widespread, along with the belief that the physically challenged are socially useless.

FILMMAKER BIOS



ELINOR BURKETT, producer, director

Burkett is an old-fashioned storyteller with unwavering faith in the power of well-wrought tales, which she's been telling from Cuba to Mongolia and Kyrgyzstan to Zimbabwe as a historian and documentary filmmaker, a reporter for the Miami Herald, in nine books of non-fiction, and scores of articles in America's leading magazines, as she tries to change the world, one story at a time. In recent years, she's chosen richly textured tales that celebrate the forgotten, that take viewers and readers inside the realities of people they never really notice, perhaps subconsciously refuse to notice.

She won an Oscar for best short documentary for *Music by Prudence*; she has received awards from the National Press Club, Penney-Missouri and the New York Newswomen; and she has received grants from the Eastman Fund, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Ford Foundation, and the American Council of Learned Societies. Twice a senior Fulbright Scholar, she has lived or worked in 13 countries and currently divides her time between homes in Zimbabwe and upstate New York.



ERROL WEBBER, producer, director of photography

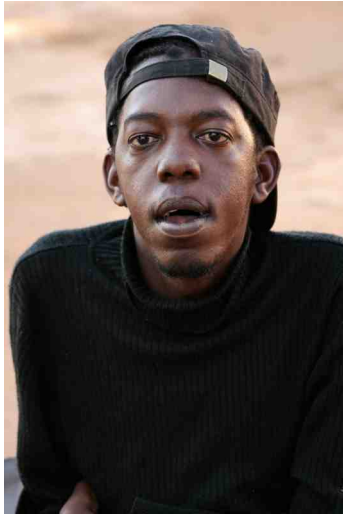
The Jamaican-born cinematographer, now 23, is the youngest cameraman ever to have shot an Oscar-winning film, *Music by Prudence*. A 2008 graduate of the Maryland Institute College of Art, Webber has already worked as a commercial cinematographer and photographer for five years, shooting everything from concerts and events to TV broadcasts and gallery-commissioned video art.

GIBBS DUBE, associate producer

Dube is one of Zimbabwe's leading journalists, former editor of the Masvingo Provincial Star, the Indosakusa-Ilanga and the Bulawayo Bureau Chief for the Zimbabwe Mirror and the Weekly Standard. In 2001, he launched an independent weekly that became the fastest-growing newspaper in the country's history before it was closed by government. He has been honored with numerous Zimbabwean and international media awards.

ABOUT LIYANA

Liyana was formed as a project among students at The King George VI Centre for Children with Physical Disabilities, an extraordinary home and school in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city. In 2006, they took second place at the Crossroads Africa Inter-Regional Music Festival in Mozambique and went on to tour Sweden, Belgium and the Netherlands. In 2009, in cooperation with the Plutzik-Goldwasser Family Foundation and the John Lennon Educational Tour Bus, they toured the United States, performing on both of America's coasts.



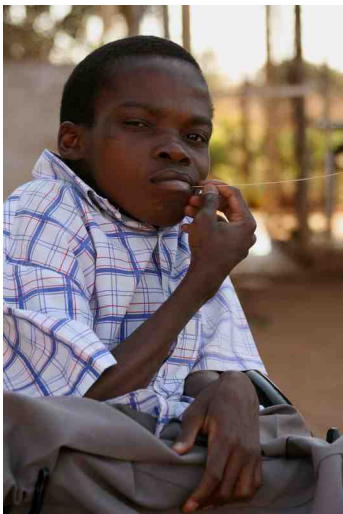
MARVELOUS MBULO

Marvelous, long the soul of the band, shares the lead vocals with Prudence. He is also a playwright and stand-up comedian.



PRUDENCE MABHENA

Lead vocalist, Prudence composes many of Liyana's songs. She is the band's musical heart.



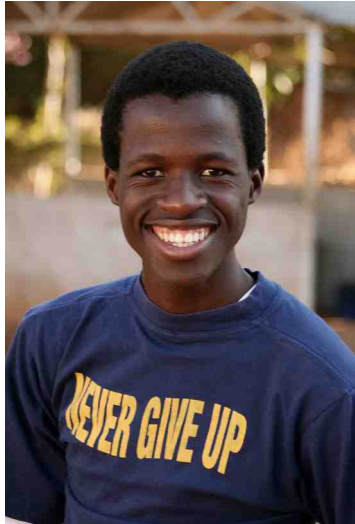
ENERGY MABURUTSE

Liyana's lead marimba player, Energy is currently finishing his A levels and hopes to go on to University in the US.



HONEST MUPATSI

Marimba player and back-up singer, Honest is currently completing his A levels and hopes to further his studies in the US.



VUSANI VUMA

The multi-talented Vusani plays the bass marimba and the drums but is also a dancer and visual artist.



TAPIWA NYENGERA

Back-up vocalist and keyboard player, Tapiwa serves as the band's MC.



FARAI MABHANDE

The band's quiet and self-contained lead keyboard player, Farai also serves as the group's sound man and videographer.



GOODWELL NZOU

Goodwell plays drums and marimbas and gives Liyana its rich bottom-end vocals. Currently finishing his A levels, he plans to continue his studies in the United States.

Q and A with Filmmakers Elinor Burkett and Errol Webber



How did you come up with the idea for this film?

ELINOR: I first heard Liyana play in 2006, just after my husband and I moved to Zimbabwe, where I joined the Department of Journalism at the National University of Science and Technology as a Fulbright professor. On a whim, we went to a concert, knowing nothing about the band and were blown away by their energy and their harmonies. Within two songs, we'd become avid fans.

I'm a writer, so I never gave a second thought to making a film about them. But a year or so later, I was back in the U.S. for a visit and Roger Williams, a TV producer, stopped by with mutual friends. After I talked about my life in Africa, even pulling out an old atlas to show them where I lived, he urged me to come up with an idea for a documentary film set there that we could work on together.

I didn't take him very seriously, but right after I returned to Zimbabwe, I went to hear Liyana play and suddenly imagined them on a big screen. The minute they left the stage, I grabbed the director of the King George VI Centre, where Liyana is based, and told her I was going to make a documentary film about them.

I spent the next three months figuring out how to shoot in a country not known for its hospitality to foreign journalists. Fortunately, I was able to enlist a group of Zimbabweans to help me surmount all the challenges. Once we had a solid plan, I mentioned the project to Roger, who immediately jumped on board as director.

How did you manage to raise the funds you needed?

ELINOR: Like most people documentary filmmakers, I spent months writing grants and scrounging for money, and it came in bits and pieces. But, ultimately, until HBO signed on more than a year into production, most of the funding came out of a home equity loan that my husband and I took on our house in New York.

How did you get involved, Errol, and what was your role?

ERROL WEBBER: It was coming toward the end of my senior year at the Maryland Institute College of Art. One day the head of the Video Department, who knew Elinor was looking for a black cameraman, pulled me aside and asked, "So, what are you doing this summer? How would you like to shoot a documentary in Zimbabwe?" Eight weeks later, I was on a plane to Africa.

I spent eight months with the members of Liyana, filming their conversations with girlfriends, following them to work, to school, to the store, even sleeping in their rooms. I wasn't the only cameraman on the project. Before I arrived, Osato Dixon shot for about 10 days for the fundraising trailer. And Derek Wieseahn flew in twice, primarily to shoot music videos that ended up not being used in the edit.



What was it like to shoot in Zim?

ERROL: Have you ever tried making dinner on an electric stove and the power goes out while you're boiling lentil soup? Imagine how it makes you feel. Now imagine that happening almost everyday...while you're filming. You come home from a day of shooting and begin transferring footage only to have your hard drive cut off because the power went out, and you don't know if you'll be able to shoot the next day because you don't know when the electricity will come back on to charge your camera batteries. Or the power comes back with such force that it burns out your hard drive. A violent run-off election created paranoia about cameras, forcing me to disguise mine inside towels or backpacks. And the director was so fearful that he often deadbolted himself inside his bedroom after dark although we lived in an uppity neighborhood with a security guard.

Then there was the challenge of lugging around a 9-pound camera rig for a mile or three while walking backwards, trying to focus on lighting and composition while my subject comfortably rolled along in a wheelchair. And let's hope I don't lose my footing in one of the crater-esque potholes that turned the streets into an obstacle course.

But shooting was great because Roger was very hands-off and often not around, leaving much of the creative direction and visual content up to me.

Since you were filming during an election cycle during which foreign journalists were jailed, weren't you ever afraid?

ELINOR: During my five years in Zim, I've probably received 100 emails from friends panicked by the news they read back home. But things always seem dangerous if you don't understand a country and its culture. Sure, there's crime, but nothing on the scale of New York in the 1980s. And while the political situation has been tense, I've never felt afraid. The authorities knew we were filming; KGVU officials had informed them, and we shot under the auspices of the university where I taught. So even when Errol got picked up by the police for filming on the street, he was released easily once they saw our documents.

Errol, you said Elinor was looking for a black cameraman. Was that necessary?

Although I'm Jamaican, Zimbabweans assumed I was African – at least until I opened my mouth. That made me a bit more invisible on the street, which was an advantage. But since I live in the US, I also had what Zimbabweans call *mukiwa* privilege – white privilege – despite my race, so I had a double advantage. There's no doubt that the band members were more comfortable with me because of the color of my skin. At one point, for example, they told me that they couldn't feel entirely comfortable with Derek. But it wasn't just because he was white. It was more his age. Since I was only 21, they felt like I was one of them.



What were your favorite shooting moments?

ELINOR: The members of Liyana all have extremely strong personalities, so life was never dull! But my favorite moment was a quiet one. Roger was in New York, and Errol and I had been shooting alone for more than a month when I realized we had no footage of Prudence and Marvelous talking about the special magic between them. Normally, it's tough to get Marve to be serious, but that afternoon, both he and Pru were eloquent – and even wrote a song about their relationship, on the spot. When I looked at the footage several days later, I knew that we had captured the essence of their friendship.



ERROL: I like immersing my viewers in the action – not by zooming in from afar but by physically bringing my camera into the middle of it. That wasn't always easy. One time, to capture the players' point of view, I duct-taped a small camera to the head of a child playing soccer in a courtyard at KGVI. Another time, when Elinor sent me out to shoot the cholera epidemic, I freaked out an entire cemetery by jumping into a grave being dug so that I could capture the image of the pick-ax coming toward the camera.

Was it always serious? Were there funny moments during your shoots?

ERROL: I'll leave out the story of the day that Roger locked himself in the bathroom and I had to kick in the door so that he wouldn't miss a critical shoot. Or the day that he and I blew up a camera. I guess the one that I still like best happened the day before we were due to leave for the U.S. for the band's tour. I was home transferring footage and Roger was in the living room getting his hair re-twisted when we got a phone call from KGVI that South African Airways had decided they could not accept so many passengers with disabilities on one flight. For a moment, it seemed some of the musicians would be left behind. It was a scene we needed to capture, so I packed up my gear and got ready to head out to KGVI, where everyone was gathered. Roger couldn't give up his new look, so he dragged his hairdresser along and tried directing while having his hair done. When I play back that moment in my mind, the contrast between the band members' anxiety and Roger's directing while having his hair twisted still makes me laugh.



ELINOR: That's an easy question: The day Errol shot from a wheelchair. I'd decided it might be useful to have footage shot from the point of view of Marvelous, Prudence, Farai, Energy or Tapiwa, who can't walk, and I thought his camera might capture some of the grimaces that passersby shoot their way. So I enlisted a deaf student at KGVU to serve as his "aide," and off they went to town. Only later did Marvelous tell us that Errol had been a pitiful excuse for a disabled person. "Anyone could see that he didn't belong in a wheelchair," he told us. "The bottoms of his shoes are scuffed."

What's the relationship between this film and Music by Prudence?

ELINOR: Shortly after we began editing our footage, Roger and I had a serious ethical dispute. A year earlier, when we began filming, several band members noticed that Roger was spending a lot of time with Prudence and told us that they weren't interested in being involved if the film's focus was going to fall entirely on her. He and I both explicitly promised them that the film would focus on the entire band. But in the editing room, he zoomed in on Prudence, down to the very title of the film. That decision violated not only his promise but also the norms of a very collective African culture. And it created the fiction that Liyana is Prudence's back-up band, which isn't the case. Ultimately, we signed an agreement in which I granted Roger all rights to Music by Prudence so long as he doesn't exhibit or distribute it outside North America for two years. He granted me the right to edit a new film from our footage for exhibition and distribution outside North America. That's when Errol stepped in to edit the new film.

How do the two films differ?

ERROL: I didn't see Music by Prudence until four months after we finished the rough cut of iThemba, and I was pretty surprised. I knew Roger had changed the focus of the film, but I hadn't realized how much the emotional tenor of he'd changed. What amazes me about the band members is how funny they are and how much they hate being objects of pity. I was shocked by how little of that came through in Music by Prudence. Their editing strategy seemed designed to make viewers feel sorry for Prudence. We went in the opposite direction since we wanted to capture the humor of the band members and their SO WHAT attitude. So while the two films are derived from the same pool of footage, they used two entirely different editing strategies to tell two very different stories.

ELINOR: Music by Prudence is an impressionist short about Prudence and her dream of leaving Zimbabwe. iThemba is a narrative film about a group of young Zimbabweans who defy popular stereotypes both about people with disabilities and about Africans as they struggle for acceptance in a country where there are still a lot of lingering misconceptions about people with disabilities. iThemba takes viewers deep inside their personal lives, into their humor and fears. Since both films were edited from the same footage, there are inevitable overlaps – but not many since we were working from almost 400 hours of footage.

What's going on with Liyana now?

ELINOR: Music by Prudence caused a serious rift in the band, and they rarely play together any more. But they're strong and resilient individuals whose experience with Liyana built their confidence. I've been working with Goodwell, Honest and Energy to prepare them for U.S. university entrance exams, and we're very optimistic. Marvelous wrote his first full play, which was performed last year, and he recently accepted a job writing for radio. Vusani is back and forth to South Africa, painting. And Prudence, Farai and Tapiwa are still working at KGVI.

What are you doing now?

ERROL: Elli and I, through our production company, Loli & Rex, recently finished shooting and editing a trailer for another film in Zimbabwe, DUMPED. I'm also the director of photography on a project she's producing with a friend in the mountains of upstate New York. And I've been working in New York and West Africa for another production company, and I may even dabble in some reality TV shooting when I'm not out shooting documentary work.

Elinor: I'm about to fly back to Zimbabwe, where my husband and I still live half the year. He runs a project called Zimkids Orphan Trust that provides a safety net and training for the future for 160 AIDS orphans, and this year, we're hoping to put up a new building and start up a computer center. While Errol and I wait for funding for DUMPED, I'll be getting back to writing and working on my 10th book.

Any final words, Errol:

If there's anything I learned from my video teacher in college it was that a filmmaker has to ask himself why anyone should care about the film he wants to make. Why should people sit through your film? If you can't answer it, then your film isn't worth making. With iThemba, the answer is easy. Most people have pretty strong preconceived notions as to what disability means in a person's life, what it allows or disallows. The members of Liyana break that mold. They taught me that a disability can be about as irrelevant as the size of one's ears. "So what?" as the band members are fond of saying.

Elinor?

I guess I can only repeat what I said at the Oscars: In a world in which people are always telling each other and themselves that they can't, the members of Liyana remind us that we're wrong. They did, so why can't we?

It's such a simple message, but I think it's a poignant reminder that comes at a moment when we in the West, in particular, need it.

CREDITS

Featuring (in order of appearance)	MARVELOUS MBULO PRUDENCE MABHENA ENERGY MABURUTSE HONEST MUPATSI VUSANI VUMA TAPIWA NYENGERA FARAI MABHANDE GOODWELL NZOU
Executive Producer	DENNIS GABOURY
Producers	ELINOR BURKETT ERROL WEBBER
Director	ELINOR BURKETT
Director of Photography	ERROL WEBBER
Additional Camera	OSATO DIXON JASON MARSHALL NDUMISO NCUBE ED ROBBINS
Sound	PAUL CHIMHOWA MATT DAVIES FARAI MABHANDE JOMO MHONE Providence Film & Sound SEAN NDLOVU Ingwe Studios ERROL WEBBER
Production Assistants	TINASHE BASA DAVID EDMEADES SHEPHERD HLOMAYI
Associate Producer	GIBBS DUBE
Assistant Producer	PATRICK WRIGHT
2 nd Unit Director	ROGER WILLIAMS
2 nd Unit Camera	DEREK WIESEHAHN
Music Composition	LIYANA BAND
Interpretation	GIBBS DUBE SHEPHERD HLOMAYI
Translation	GIBBS DUBE EMILIA MASAKA CLEOPHAS MUNERI
Legal Services	CAREY WAGNER



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The iThemba trailer, film cuts and downloadable photographs are available for the press at
<http://www.loliandrex.com/ithemba>

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