

TESTAMENT OF YOUTH

A joyous but gritty tale of young female friendship in inner-city London, 'Rocks' did away with the usual chains of filmmaking command, with director Sarah Gavron and writers Theresa Ikoko and Claire Wilson enabling the cast of teenage girls to tell their story in their own honest way. **Simran Hans** talks bucking convention with key members of the team

Real queens fix each other's crowns" reads a sticker tacked to 16-year-old Shola's bedroom wall. Shola (Bukky Bakray), better known as Rocks, might be the best-loved member of her all-girl crew, which includes her best friend Sumaya (Kosar Ali), but things are less stable at home. When her mother suddenly runs out on her, Rocks must assume responsibility for her younger brother Emmanuel (D'angelou Osei Kissiedu). She must also keep going to school, keep on top of the dramas of being in Year 11, and keep out of the way of neighbours for fear social services will discover her situation.

With its garrulous, multiracial cast made up of schoolgirls from the East London borough of Hackney, *Rocks* might draw comparisons with a film such as Céline Sciamma's 2014 drama *Girlhood*, which spent time with a girl gang of Afro-French teenagers living in a Paris banlieue. Yet its perspective feels more in keeping with the tradition of British dramas about working-class communities told – and often written – from a youthful point of view. *Rocks* joins a lineage that runs from such classic post-war social-realist entries as Tony Richardson's *A Taste of Honey* (1961) and John Schlesinger's *Billy Liar* (1963) through to Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher* (1999),

Shane Meadows's *This Is England* (2006) and Andrea Arnold's *Fish Tank* (2009), but there's also a very fresh energy and audacity to the storytelling. Though its title suggests something rough, the film sparkles with life, less immovable grey stone than uncut gem.

This vibrancy owes much to how the film was conceived, developed and produced. Created in a conscious environment of non-hierarchical collaboration, its team were motivated by a desire to make something authentic and informed by the voices of its subjects. I sat down with some of the film's key players, including lead actors Bukky Bakray and Kosar Ali, writers Theresa Ikoko and Claire Wilson, director Sarah Gavron and associate director Anuradha Henriques, to talk through a new way of working.

SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM

"Sarah Gavron and [producer] Faye Ward said they wanted to make a film about girls in London. I'm a girl from London, I wrote a play called *Girls*, so I feel they just googled 'Girls in London' and I popped up," says Ikoko, smiling. The room erupts with laughter. The award-winning Nigerian-British playwright is describing how she connected with Gavron, Wilson, Ward and casting director Lucy Pardee. "We weren't quite sure

HACKNEY'S FINEST
Rocks casting director Lucy Pardee and her associate Jessica Straker spent months in schools and youth clubs in the London borough of Hackney, selecting their cast from 1,300 girls





what we wanted it to be but we knew we wanted to work in a different way," she adds.

Gavron and Ward pitched for seed development money from Film4 and the BFI to do the research needed to work out what the film would be. With additional support from the Wellcome Trust, they eventually decided to focus on girls in Year 9 and work with them over a sustained period. Pardee, a frequent collaborator of Andrea Arnold, and her casting associate Jessica Straker, spent several months in schools and youth clubs across Hackney, eventually forming their own workshops and whittling down 1,300 girls to approximately 60. Ikoko recalls friendships forming in the group, hinting at the bond that was blossoming between Bakray and Ali. Rocks is the group's natural leader and its solid, stoic centre of gravity. The prankish Sumaya, a gangly headscarfed motormouth with an acid tongue, is her light-hearted foil. As a double-act, they have electric chemistry, bonding over their shared experiences as the daughters of Nigerian and Somali immigrants respectively. Bakray is 17 years old; Ali a year younger. The pair were just 14 and 13 when they began the process.

"Personally, acting was not an option for me," says Ali. "It was *Rocks* that made me love it, and made me see that this is something I want to live." Bakray didn't see acting as a tangible career either. "I would just think about easier routes. A life of uncertainty wasn't something I would ever want to put in my head, so I was thinking about going to uni and studying," she says. A pragmatic attitude towards this precarious and increasingly elitist craft isn't surprising given the phasing out of drama from the school curriculum, rising training fees and a lack of positive roles for people from working-class backgrounds. Bakray enjoyed drama lessons at secondary school as "time to release" but not as something she had considered with any seriousness. The workshops, which ran for a year before Ikoko and Wilson's script was written, involved improvisation, collaboration and "fun activities" designed to provide a productive but low-stakes playground. Since making the film, Bakray has joined Rada's Youth Company. Ali has ambitions to write and direct.

When asked how they built their obvious rapport, the girls eye each other. "Real recognise real, to be honest," says Bakray. "It's really hard because when young people meet other people, it's like..." "Awkward," interjects Ali. "It's awkward," Bakray agrees. "You're always guarded because

FUNNY GAMES
Playwright Theresa Ikoko (below) wanted to inject a flavour of the joy she remembered from her own Hackney childhood into the script for *Rocks* (above)



you want to protect yourself and you don't want anyone to judge you, but the first day I met Kosar, it was like I was speaking to a long-term friend. We were literally giving other people the side eye."

To put it another way, the girls were of the same spirit. Wilson describes this spirit, and that of the film, as "truthful and honest about friendship and girls", and animated by "joy that wasn't being wrenched in a way that was manipulative". The film hints at the brutality of the care system and the austerity measures that have affected young people in urban areas, but any institutional critique feels secondary to its giddy teenage lifeforce. When writing the script, she and Ikoko sought to reflect "the amazing amount of joy that we felt in the young women we met but also in the relationships with each other – we were constantly in fits of giggles like we were back at school".

With their cast in place, the team developed a story Ikoko had written as a love letter to her older sister, based on her own experiences of growing up on a council estate in Hackney. "When I see my community reflected on TV, I don't see the love or the joy that I knew," Ikoko explains. "When we shared baths, we had water fights. When we shared beds, we would save all of our stories for bedtime so we could talk about it. My sister did a lot in order to give me a childhood, in order to give me joy. In Dave's song 'Black', he says: 'Loud in our laughter, silent in our suffering.' I think joy is the language of our people."

Rocks, as its title suggests, tells a story about resilience and the way young Black women are often hardened by both circumstance and society, and forced to grow up before their years. Yet, beneath their tough exteriors, as Ikoko puts it, there exist "wells of joy and love and compassion". The film is adamant in expressing Rocks's capacity for joy despite the trauma she experiences, excavating her reserves of tenderness and humour. We see it in the way she cares for younger brother Emmanuel, in a dance lesson at school, and in the spontaneous, quickfire classroom banter between her and the other girls.

It's also the guiding principle behind one of the film's funniest and most anarchic moments – an impromptu food fight. Bakray and Ali snigger at its mere mention, remembering how Bakray went off-piste during filming, showcasing a gift for comic improvisation. "Did you do what you were supposed to do?" Ikoko asks her. "No," she replies sheepishly. In the scene, Rocks disrupts

a food technology lesson, energetically lassoing a handful of cake mix about her head before flinging it at new girl Roshé. "Oh, she disrupted it big time!" cackles Ali. The instruction was no food throwing ("especially not on the hair," adds Gavron), as the girls were supposed to shoot another scene directly afterwards. Rocks's victim ends up covered in flour – hair and all. "Everyone got excited when she done that," grins Ali. "Shaneigha [Monik Greyson], who plays Roshé, was getting ballistic," Bakray says, laughing. According to Ali, Greyson cried. "We gave them too much power," Ikoko sighs.

Associate director Henriques emphasises that this atmosphere of warmth and flexibility wouldn't have been possible to build without time. "We had a long period getting to know each other and if you tried to rush that, we wouldn't have gotten to a place of trust and openness by the time we started shooting," she says. That trust was helped by the fact that many of the film's key collaborators had experience in community and youth work. Henriques runs arts collective Skin Deep; Wilson volunteers at Welcome Kitchen, working with refugees and asylum seekers; Ikoko used to have a full-time job in youth justice; and Gavron spent her teenage years hanging out in the community centre where her mother worked.

'To make the film a team of a hundred women took centre-stage, and it wasn't given to us or sacrificed for us. Nobody stepped aside for us – we all stepped up'

Among the crew, 75 per cent of whom were female, were a mix of ages and experience levels. Still, Wilson insists that they were all on the same page. "It made sense to 'cast' the crew, and find a crew who fitted the story," Gavron says. This included hair and make-up designer Nora Robertson, who is from Ghana and specialises in Black hair; and director of photography Hélène Louvart – the DP on *Happy as Lazzaro* (2018) and *Beach Rats* (2017) – who presided over a female camera crew. Many of the girls didn't have experience of being on a film set – it was Gavron's hope that being surrounded by female collaborators would put them at ease. The rawness of Bakray's performance as a vulnerable young woman who has learned to manage her emotions, even in moments of crisis, feels like a vindication of this decision to create a safe environment.

The film's all-female crew impacted its cast members off camera, too. "2Pac said that he was not gonna change the world, but he was gonna spark the mind that will," Bakray says. "I think all these ladies, they're inspiring so many different people, and the world's just gonna be beautiful. It's sick, it's nice." Ali calls her collaborators "superwomen", and says the experience of watching them at work was inspiring and motivating.

Having directed films including *Brick Lane* (2007) and *Suffragette* (2015), Gavron was one of the more seasoned on set. Yet she is adamant that of the whole team, she likely learned the most. "I knew the least about what it was to be a young girl growing up today," she says. And so she and the more established crew members would often defer to the girls, though Ikoko is quick to emphasise that young people are "more than mines of information and language, and more than problems as well".

Gavron, a middle-class white woman, says she knew she wasn't the person to author a story about young women of colour. However, in a risk-averse filmmaking climate, she was interested in facilitating it. "I thought, 'I'd love to use my skills as a director and my experiences to work with other people in a collaborative way,'" she says.

But as Ikoko points out, the celebratory, boundary-pushing story behind *Rocks* isn't one of liberal goodwill from white gatekeepers who've chosen to decentre themselves. "That implies that all of the responsibility, therefore all of the kudos, is on them. Actually, it is a team of a hundred women who took centre-stage, and it wasn't given to us or sacrificed for us. Nobody stepped aside – we all stepped up." It's a point Gavron says she agrees with entirely.

It was by design that the film's young subjects would be given both the opportunity and the resources to tell their own story, on their own terms. To do this, the team would need to do away with hierarchy and so it was established from the beginning of the project that there would be no conventional chain of command. "It's a utopia, because adults are listening to you," Ali says of their set's collapsed power dynamic. Instead of the usual setup, the filmmaking would be organised around the idea of reciprocity, and the girls' individual ideas considered with seriousness. Henriques describes "a shared value system" led by the voices of Black and Brown women telling stories as an antidote to traditional, top-down filmmaking. "For me, as a younger filmmaker, that's one of the things I can't compromise on now," she says. This model isn't a kind of feminist utopia – it's a necessity. ☺

***Rocks* is released in UK cinemas on 18 September and will be reviewed in our next issue**



MIRROR MIRROR REFLECTING DIVERSITY ON SCREEN

Bukky Bakray (above right), who plays the title character in 'Rocks', and Kosar Ali (above left), who plays her best friend Sumaya, discuss the importance of being able to see girls like themselves properly represented on screen.

Kosar Ali: As clichéd as it sounds, growing up I didn't even watch English films to be honest, because first of all, it's boring, and second, I didn't see myself on screen. Representing my religion and my culture and black girls is so important to me because I didn't get that when I was little. I feel like [for] people from my culture, religion is [seen as] such a barrier to things that can be done, but it's not like that, as long as you're playing to your morals. When I went to

Toronto [for the film festival, where *Rocks* had its world premiere] and saw people from Somalia and so full of emotion. It was so real. I'm honoured and grateful to be able to do that.

Bukky Bakray: To be able to identify yourself is key. People underestimate the power of film. I didn't read a lot growing up because most of the books that were presented to me were books with characters I couldn't identify myself with. I can't relate to it, so I can't engage. In film, people like myself are missing out on the experience. It's not fair that other people can identify and get lost in that experience. ☺

Simran Hans