

Rémi Bonhomme on *We, Students! (Nous, étudiants!)*

Rafiki Fariala was only 17 years old when he directed his short film *You and I* as part of the first cohort of the Ateliers Varan in Bangui – a project initiated by, among others, writer-director Boris Lojkine, who shot his film *Camille* in the Central African Republic. Inspired by filmmaker Jean Rouch and his concept of ‘direct cinema’, these annual Ateliers Varan documentary workshops offer ten young Central Africans the opportunity to film their country, which has been ravaged by civil war for nearly a decade. In 2021, after the project was transformed into a film school named Cinébangui, training was interrupted when European funding was suspended. Despite this injustice, the new voices of Central African cinema continue to reach us through films by the likes of Elvis Sabin Ngaibino, Leila Thiam, and Anne-Bertille Vopiande Ndeysey – and here, with his first feature, Fariala.

Buoyed by rare sincerity and vitality, *We, Students!* documents the living conditions and the hopes of several students attending a public university in the Central African Republic. For three years, director Fariala filmed his friends Benjamin, Aaron and Nestor, capturing a moment when the possibilities of the future collide with the realities of a corrupt society. How can you sustain ambitions for yourself and your country when faced with a failing education system?

Leaving the city of Bangui out of the frame, Fariala’s camera captures this student drama with precision, as social injustice and the failings of the state play out. Young men and women speak about the sexual harassment suffered by female students, the lack of seats in lecture halls, the deplorable living conditions on campus. From this poignant and at times harsh testimony emerges a remarkable optimism – that of a young person who dreams of love and, indeed, of changing the world. Fariala gives voice to these hopes and frustrations through his slam poetry. These songs of lament and protest punctuate the film, echoing a message of solidarity that reverberates beyond the walls of the dilapidated campus.

*We, Students!* gently observes the delicate transition from the strength and power of the student collective to the fragility of their individual trajectories. Despite having obtained his degree, Benjamin works as a security guard while he awaits a better job; Aaron, now the father of twin girls, has to support his family; Nestor still struggles to finish his studies. Their life paths may have separated, but the group of friends will always be linked by this film – a heartfelt expression of Fariala’s faith in the possibilities of cinema.

*Rémi Bonhomme is the Artistic Director of the Marrakech International Film Festival*