

Nairobi Half Life with Mugambi Nthinga

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Nairobi Half Life is a film about a young man going to the city to follow his dream and instead ends up in crime. The film was [submitted for an Oscar award](#). Mugambi Nthinga, one of the cast members speaks to us about Kenya's growing film industry and what the submission means. [video]



Mugambi Nthinga

■ **What character do you play in the movie?**

Mugambi Nthinga: Cedric. An actor who befriends Mwas as they rehearse together for an important play. Cedric takes an immense liking to Mwas, the film's main protagonist.

■ **How was it like identifying with the character you play in the film?**

Nthinga: First thing any actor needs to do is respect his character and bring his all to playing him - no judgments, no embellishments, no prejudice. Once you are able to identify your character as a flawed human being trying to win something, just like you are, then you're ready. I played a conflicted actor with secrets. That was quite the experience.

■ **Which is your favourite part of the movie?**

Nthinga: Has to be the bit where Mwas is carrying all that contraband in the mkokoteni and he tricks the cops on patrol. Parapanda Italia, Parapandaaa... The audience has applauded at every screening I've attended. They're rooting for a thief! The song playing in the background, Just A Band's Ha-He, adds so much more to the scene.

■ **How was it like relating to the other cast members?**

Nthinga: Very good. Particularly Babu. He is one of the best human beings I know - such a good heart and such commitment to his work. It was an honour working with him. I got to hang out with the gang members on the last day of shooting. It is funny how nice they are in real life. Very nice people.

■ **How long have you been an actor?**

Nthinga: I have been an actor since I was five. I played the little drummer boy in a nursery school Christmas play. My mum and little sister were in the audience. The reviews were amazing.

■ **Which other films have you acted in before?**

Nthinga: I have been in a short film called *One More Vote For Obama*, directed by Senegalese/French director Mama Keita. We shot it in Harlem, New York. It's on [YouTube](#). I also had a background role in *Law Abiding Citizen*. You would need to pause and squint a bit to see me, though. I am currently working on a short film with a young director and visionary

called Jesse Kyalo. I was also on the cast of the M-Net produced, pan-African drama series, *Changes*.

■ ***What is the perception of actors in Kenya?***

Nthinga: It is significantly different from the perception of actors from say, 10 years ago. We were considered self-entitled loafers with nothing better to do then. Now our contribution to the arts and people's daily lives is being recognised and appreciated. There's respect for us now. We can strut on the streets and proudly say what we do. We have some way to go before it adds up monetarily, though. They're driving Range Rovers in Nigeria. I want to be able to buy a Range from my earnings as an actor too! I want kids to be able to tell their parents that they want to be actors, and have their parents give them spirited pats on the back and say, That's my baby!

■ ***What was it like being a part of the cast of Nairobi Half Life?***

Nthinga: It was a brilliant experience. Brilliant! Without a doubt my highlight of 2010. And now that the film is out and doing so well, even better. We learnt a great deal. We were pushed and pushed. We stretched. We grew. And now people love our work. An actor couldn't ask for more.

■ ***Why did you audition for the film?***

Nthinga: The casting director called me and said this would be an exciting project to be on. He pointed out that it wouldn't pay much because it was a workshop film, but it would be an investment for my career. He told that to everyone who was interested in working on the film. And most of us listened. I think *Nairobi Half Life* has the best collective cast of any film I've seen recently.

■ ***What were some of the highs and lows of acting in the movie?***

Nthinga: I really can't remember any lows. I terribly love acting. The first day on set is always difficult - but it's a nice kind of tough. The only harder day than day one is the day they yell that it's a wrap - that there is the low. We cheer because we are finished, but it is a terrible low.

■ ***Did you ever think the film would be submitted to the Oscars? How does the possibility of winning an Oscar award make you feel?***

Nthinga: Everyone involved in this film believed in it. So when I showed up to pick up my script, someone from the production office mentioned that this film was worthy of the Oscars, and it might be submitted. I thought they were being overly optimistic. But here we are. It's surreal. If we get nominated, then, Wow. Wow. That will be - otherworldly. I find it difficult to wrap my head around that. Let's let it happen and see.

■ ***Was there a time you felt you wanted to give up?***

Nthinga: Not once, thank God. But when I walked into the audition room and saw Tom Tykwer in there, I almost ran off. I mean, it's Tom Tykwer!!!

■ ***What challenges face actors in Kenya?***

Nthinga: We still need a useful sort of recognition. By useful, I mean, we put so much work into our craft, it ought to pay us back accordingly. There's much more affluent people doing much less. That ought to change.

■ ***Assuming you had another chance to redo the film, what would you change?***

Nthinga: Nothing at all!

View the trailer

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Carole Kimutai is a writer and editor based in Nairobi, Kenya. She is currently an MA student in New Media at the University of Leicester, UK. Follow her on Twitter at @CaroleKimutai.

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