

# movies

## YOUR MOVE, LUPITA

### Lupita Nyong'o on 'Queen of Katwe' and diversifying Hollywood

By Lauren Chval | REDEYE

It would be hard to burst onto the Hollywood scene with greater impact than Lupita Nyong'o has. Perhaps that's to be expected when your first role in a feature film lands you an Academy Award, but for Nyong'o, it was more than that. Over the course of her promotional tour for 2013's "12 Years a Slave," Nyong'o was catapulted to "It Girl" status. Her fashion choices, hairstyles, interviews, speeches, stature—her very persona—were things to rave about. Social media dubbed her a "queen."



Lupita Nyong'o  
ANTONIO PEREZ/TRIBUNE PHOTOS

In person, there is something regal about the 33-year-old actress. She speaks slowly and with emphasis, her posture perfect and her hands clasped in her lap. Words matter to her—twice she asks for clarification on a question before she answers it. Her stateliness is especially fitting as she promotes "Queen of Katwe," a film inspired by the true story of Ugandan chess prodigy Phiona Mutesi.

"This is a very intimate story, unlike the other, more popular stories told on the African continent. They're about wars or political dictators or what-have-you. Those are [on] a much bigger scope," Nyong'o said. "This is a view of Africa told with Africans front and center. It's their narrative, whereas in most films where you see Africa or the Africans, it's told from a foreign perspective. So I think [director] Mira Nair was determined to tell the story from the inside out, and that means that you have layered characters. Yes, you have struggle, and the story rests in struggle, but it is also a story about perseverance. It's also a story about vision and magic! The magic of realizing your dream."

Phiona and her family live in the slums of Katwe, selling maize to make ends meet. Nyong'o plays Harriet, Phiona's young widowed mother. Considering that Nyong'o has no children herself, playing a mother of four was a bit of a challenge, but she brings both strength and vulnerability to Harriet, who's scared to let her daughter dream for fear of disappointment.

"When you live in poverty, you're living a very reactive life. You're striving to survive rather than to thrive, you know? And there's very little time that you're able to dedicate to actually visualizing a better future for yourself. You just are trying to figure out what your next meal is," Nyong'o said. "So you don't have time to have big dreams and to figure out what you need to do to achieve them."

As Harriet, Nyong'o makes her first on-screen appearance in two years. She hasn't been idle—she lent her voice to "The Jungle Book" and "Star Wars: The Force Awakens,"

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—Lupita Nyong'o

Madina Nalwanga (left) and Lupita Nyong'o in 'Queen of Katwe'



and earned a Tony nomination for her Broadway debut in "Eclipsed." But she said that "Queen of Katwe" spoke to her like no other project that's come across her desk, and it's partially because of that commitment to the African perspective.

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In the film, Phiona is coached by an African missionary, Robert Katende (played by David Oyelowo of "Selma"). Nyong'o has admitted that something she appreciated about "Queen of Katwe" was how it avoided the "white savior" trope—a scenario where a nice white person comes along and rescues the poor black people from their circumstances.

"I worked for Mira Nair's film lab [Mirabai Films] in Uganda, and the slogan of that film lab is 'If we don't tell our stories, no one else will.' And so it's about who is the person—what is the intention or motivation of the person telling the story?" Nyong'o said. "I remember years back, reading an article about the writer ... of 'The Last King of Scotland,' and he was being asked why he told it from the perspective that he did, and his answer was, 'That's the perspective that I know.'"

When it comes to telling her own story, Nyong'o is expanding both the range of



her performances and conventions of the industry. "Queen of Katwe," "Eclipsed" and "12 Years a Slave" all presented unique difficulties, but Nyong'o hopes to branch out in a different direction entirely at some point: comedy.

"I think that that is a challenge I would wish upon myself," she laughed. "It's very vulnerable to be funny; I did it in graduate school and it terrified me, and I want to do it some more."

The comedy Nyong'o performed in during graduate school was called "The Really Big Fat Show," and her role was that of a clown. Imagining the Oscar winner in clown drag is a little unexpected, but then,

Nyong'o doesn't shy away from breaking the mold.

That holds true off the screen, as well. When Nyong'o became an ambassador for Lancome, she also became the first black woman to represent the cosmetics house that traditionally showcased women like Julia Roberts, Emma Watson and Kate Winslet. On the red carpet, Nyong'o has made her mark by donning bold, declarative pieces that integrate her African heritage. She has spoken out about serving as an example for girls who think their dark skin isn't beautiful.

Does she think her career is paving the way for a more diverse Hollywood? It's a big question—one she weighs more heavily than usual before answering.

"I don't think any one person does it," she said. "I think it's the movement of lots of individuals coming together at one time. It's a convergence of intention, you know? So I certainly hope that me being around and working is changing something, shifting something, but I don't think I can claim the power of being able to shift an entire industry."

But little shifts are clear to those who look for them. After two years of #OscarsSoWhite, the Film Academy invited a record 683 new members in its 2016 class, 41 percent of which was people of color. But for Nyong'o, even this film is a victory.

"We are about to open 'Queen of Katwe' across America," she said. "I think that is a major change."

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## 'Queen of Katwe' is a feel-good story



**Lauren Chval**

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For a glorified board game for pretentious people (no, *you're* bitter), chess is featured in a lot of movies. Perhaps it's because something about it is reminiscent of a sport, and a movie about a chess prodigy can have the same tone as a good sports movie. "Queen of Katwe" has

that tone, but folded in is an emotional, complex portrait of life in slums of Uganda, making this story more than the simple formula it could have stuck to.

### What happens?

Phiona (Madina Nalwanga) is a young girl living with her widowed mother, Harriet (Lupita Nyong'o), and three siblings in rural Kampala, Uganda. She and her brother can't afford to go to school but sell maize every day to help Harriet make ends meet.

### REVIEW



★ ★ ★ ★ ★  
**Queen of Katwe**  
PG

Missionary Robert Katende (David Oyelowo) begins teaching local children how to play chess, and Phiona has a knack for it. She quickly sets herself apart and begins winning national and international tournaments, but tempering her big dreams is the reality of her family's struggles.

### What's good?

Nyong'o and Oyelowo are both captivating on-screen, and newcomer Nalwanga holds her own. Nyong'o breathes life into Harriet, and director Mira Nair is smart enough to make her the heart of the story. The story is made more affecting by mixing in the hardship of Phiona's family life and the battle her mother feels between encouraging her talent and lowering her expectations.

The movie was actually filmed in Katwe, and Nair's camera is always moving, intent on capturing both the vibrancy and the somberness of the setting. Gorgeous shots of the Katwe children tug at heartstrings without feeling manipulative.

### What's bad?

Occasionally, "Queen of Katwe" seems confused on its own ideologies. When Phiona feels too good to help her mother, the film suggests that Harriet should work harder to support her daughter. Katende is always telling the kids they can do more and chases after an engineering dream, but when it's offered to him, he feels it's more important to keep his part-time coaching job. The film never addresses these discrepancies.

### Final verdict

A sweet film that sticks to a tried-and-true formula and still manages to inspire.