



JANUS FILMS

WELCOME II THE TERRORDOME

Directed by Ngozi Onwurah



NATIONAL PRESS

Cinetic Marketing

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Film Info: | 1995 | 90 minutes | Color | English | 1.85: 1 Aspect Ratio

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SYNOPSIS

Ngozi Onwurah's radically ahead-of-its-time Afrofuturist vision *WELCOME II THE TERRORDOME* made history as the first theatrically distributed British feature directed by a Black woman. Nevertheless, it was largely dismissed upon its release by critics unable to see the urgency in its evocation of a gritty dystopia in which Black people have been relegated to living in a slum called the Terrordome, where simmering racial tension threatens to boil over in the wake of a young boy's death. Over thirty years later, Onwurah's fusion of political commentary and genre spectacle looks positively prescient, and her ability to build an entire cosmology that connects the history of slavery to present-day police brutality is nothing less than visionary.

A Conversation with Ngozi Onwurah

How did you get the bug for filmmaking in the first place?

I was told so many stories growing up in Nigeria. When I came to England, my father, who got left behind, said to me that the reason Africa was going through so many problems was that Africans had stopped listening to their own gods and people—they'd taken on the white religions. Our gods and ancestors couldn't help us because we couldn't communicate with each other. He said if ever I felt in doubt I should listen to my *chi*—your *chi* is your own guardian spirit. But I felt that I lost my *chi* because she wasn't doing anything, and I was in misery. Then I started to find it again, partly because of people like Malcolm X who were restoring [a sense of pride]. We were the only Black family on a council estate in the north of England, in a place called Newcastle upon Tyne. The north of England is "salt-of-the-earth brutality." When you grow up in a place, and they're telling you that you are the ugliest, to have someone tell you "no, you're not"—it felt like it was re-opening my ears, so I could start to hear the ancestors and my stories again.

I decided that I wanted to be a storyteller. The obvious thing was to write books, but every time I thought of a story I saw it. So, I thought about being a photographer, which is when I applied to an art foundation course. But during that course, I realized that I liked moving images and wanted to tell stories with films, still in that tradition of African storytelling. Then I applied to film school, got in, and began this journey. But I realized I couldn't move forward because it felt like a dirty secret that I'd been growing up with the fact that I didn't want to be Black, I tried to be white, I was angry with my father—there was this whole mess. Also, when you start being proud of being Black you also start being ashamed of when you *weren't* being Black and disowned people. This is how [my first short film] *Coffee Coloured Children* (1988) came about. I knew that I had to make the film and explain that personal story in order to go forward. My white mother was very hurt by it, because she felt that I was erasing her from my story. She didn't know why I wasn't attempting to discover my Irish roots. She didn't understand that my Irish roots had no impact on my daily life. My Black roots defined my daily life, safety, outlook. I wanted to make a film that told the story of what her role was in my life, what she had given me, how I was her daughter, what we had from each other, but without compromise. That became *The Body Beautiful* (1991), and those were my two starting films.

Can you tell me about the origins of *Welcome II The Terrordome*?

It was a second- or third- year project at the National Film and Television School in Beaconsfield. The film was meant to be 20 to 25 minutes long and I wanted to do something with hip-hop as the basis of a film about the Black experience. There were a few things going on at the time in England that weren't seeming to get any recognition in the press or in the public consciousness. I wanted a way of bringing those stories to the fore, and I had an idea that if people knew, it could make an impact. This is when I was very young and believed that film could change things.. There were all these incidents of police brutality and racism, like the murders of Rolan Adams and Stephen Lawrence, two Black teenagers in London in the early 1990s.. One particular story was about a white girl who'd got pregnant with her Black boyfriend, and her white ex-boyfriend had beaten her up and caused her to miscarry. A tiny article said "she later miscarried," as though the miscarriage and beating had been two separate events. I'm mixed-race, so I really identified with the baby that had been beaten out of her. I got really angry and also got a bad toothache, which started on a Friday. I couldn't go to the dentist until Monday, so I took a load of painkillers, a load of alcohol, sat in my room, listened to Public Enemy on full blast, and wrote the script.

This was a twenty-minute project, but it just kept growing. It was strong but unfinished. There were more things [to say], and I didn't want to move onto anything else. People were so supportive, so I wrote another section, and it took two-and-a-half years to finish filming.

How did you get the crew together?

I was at film school with the cinematographer, Alwin [Kuchler]. He is from Germany, and he'd never shot Black people before. I was so fed up of going to see films at that time where, if it was a Black film, it was very gritty and documentary style, all about urban pain and deprivation, and very low budget. If there were Black people in films with white people, they were definitely the subordinates. If a DP was lighting the scene, and you had to balance a dark-skinned person alongside a light-skinned white person, a lot of people just don't know how to light it, and they'll light one, so you end up having teeth and eyeballs standing next to white people. I went through it with Alwin: "I want to see the Black faces. Black skin is beautiful. If you don't have time and there's issues, we can blow out the white people. Hopefully you'll figure it out." But we had no money, very little

resources, and everybody was learning. We had to accept that people would make mistakes.

So many of the crew that we got from the film school were really committed to the film. There were a lot of outside people coming in in terms of cast and crew. In Britain, there wasn't a huge range of parts for Black actors—it's not like they were bouncing from one Hollywood movie to another—but you had actors like Brian Bovell and Suzette Llewellyn who were well known and had solid TV roles, who were really committed and came on board.

What was really good about the film school was that they realized that something was happening here and they let us go forward. They said they couldn't keep supporting it financially—that wasn't their role, they're not a studio—but I could take it where it needed to go.

Can you talk about the Pan-African aspect of the film? It's a British film, but it has a foot in America in terms of music and style, there's West African history there too, and your own heritage.

I am a product of the diaspora. It's a triangle: Africa, America, and Britain. My direct connection is with Africa and Britain: I have a British mother and a Nigerian father, I grew up in Nigeria and England. It was a real intertwined triangle, and there are lots of misunderstandings and miscommunications between the three. American influences really shaped my life. Malcolm X was huge on lots of different levels. His quote, "It's just like when you've got some coffee that's too black, which means it's too strong. What do you do? You integrate it with cream, you make it weak"—he was talking about me, even though he was mixed. And then Public Enemy, the history of hip-hop—Black Britain is very small, so it took a lot [of influences] from Black America.

For me, there's a linear direction from oral storytelling to hip-hop. Nigerian and Ibo storytelling is very visceral, elemental—there's lots of fire and water and oceans and being swept away. It's both oral and visual—magical realism is so cinematic. That was part of what I was trying to do by linking these stories.

As an Ibo growing up in Nigeria, Ibo Landing is a story that is told to you with a lot of pride: "They came and tried to enslave us. We decided we would rather die than be

slaves.” The side effect of that is saying that all the other Black people who ended up in America were willing to go through slavery. There is a harsh judgment in that story. There is that relationship between Africa, West Indians, and the Americas; Nigerians and Africans can look down on [West Indians and Americans], think they’re not into education, and the West Indians and Black Americans—not so much now, but there was a period when they looked down on them. They had the same pre-conceived notions of Africans having bones through their noses and so on. So, I wanted to have that dialogue between the three aspects of the diaspora about what we’ve learned from each other, what we need to learn from each other, and how we’re all connected.

In the 1990s, there was a real moment where filmmakers across the African diaspora were speaking to, and working with, each other. Can you talk about that moment, and any other filmmakers that influenced you?

I went to an arty film school— St Martin’s School of Art— before I went to the National Film and Television School, and I had a really arty sensibility until I realized that it wasn’t quite for me. I had a really arty sensibility until I realized that it wasn’t quite for me. There was one project where we did a whole film, but we didn’t put film in the camera, and it was to say “What *is* film?” That felt very “white” to me, very wasteful. We had a whole crew and actors and everything, but there was no film in the camera. So, I started to veer away from that. Before that, I was a full-on little art girl. Two things were really pivotal to me in terms of Black filmmaking in particular. One was going to see Spike Lee’s *She’s Gotta Have It* in the cinema. I realized I had never sat with a bowl of popcorn in the cinema and watched a Black movie before. I’d always gone to some arthouse, political place or college and sat on uncomfortable chairs, and I was being educated. It’s not my favorite Spike Lee film now, but it’s the most influential one because it opened up this world: We can be on the big screen and sit there with our popcorn and enjoy a movie.

At the film school, they really liked my stories, but I was giving to them all the time, and some of the feedback that I was getting, even when it was just about filmmaking—some of it was very good, but it was very white, and it would feel like *I* was educating *them* and wasn’t getting the help I needed. I didn’t know how to do it, and they didn’t either. Credit to St. Martins: they agreed to bring in Black Audio Film Collective to take over a half-semester and run that whole block of the course. It was just amazing to feel that switch where it’s like: you’re the center, you’re the perspective, you’re the starting point.

It's through *your* eyes. The conversations that you could have about your work and what you were trying to achieve, was so different and revolutionary.

There were a lot of Francophone African films coming out at that point, and I really enjoyed them. *Coffee Coloured Children* did well, so I would end up on the festival circuit and meet up with the African filmmakers. The films are great but they felt they were being shaped to be experienced through a French lens. I remember a Senegalese filmmaker saying to me that he was struggling because he wanted to make films that he could show in his village, so that his people would understand them. When he was making films in that system, he always felt that the first audience were meant to be Parisians. *They* needed to understand it first, then his village could understand what was left over from that. It was a good benchmark, to make films that you could take back to a Nigerian audience.

***Welcome II The Terrordome* does not look like other British films of the period: It has color, ambitious production design. What were your intentions for the look and feel?**

My very first film school project was based on Tarkovsky. I took my sister and a load of other people into the Pennines [a mountain chain in northern England]. They were dressed in white, carrying milk and pouring it over themselves and down waterfalls. I like visual aesthetics, and it always felt like Black people weren't afforded the opportunity to be represented this way on screen. When you're in Africa or any Black community, it's very visual, it's vibrant. You don't see yourself in a Channel 4 documentary about deprivation and broken homes or whatever it is—your life is vivid, so I wanted to put that on the screen. I also really do think that Black skin is so beautiful, the various different shades of it. Lighting, fabrics, and production design were all very important. That was a real driving force for me in *Terrordome*, for it to have a real cinematic visuality that harkened also to when I was growing up in Nigeria and being told stories—I saw these stories in my head and they were always big, big, big, magnificent, vibrant. I wanted to play with everything: lights flashing, and body movements, which is why I have the martial arts guys covered in oil, so that you could get the shine that the light could reflect off. I was slightly obsessive about all that.

Let's talk about the reaction at the time. It's historic for being the first film by a Black British woman to get a theatrical release.

I always say that *Terrordome* is my “angry film,” because I did it from a place of anger, and I think that having anger, when you’re *us*, is perceived as illegitimate, especially as a woman—it’s as though you’re not allowed to be angry in the same way. When you send it out in the world it’s like you’ve given birth to it, and it belongs to everyone. There was a huge pushback in Britain about how I was just ranting, that the film was violently spewing things out and not offering solutions. And I thought to myself: I don’t understand how you can think there needs to be a way out in the film when there isn’t a way out in the actual world we live in. I still have the right to speak and tell a story. Some Black critics thought that I wasn’t putting it out in the right way—the discourse wasn’t open, and there were so few films being made by Black filmmakers that I had a responsibility to make films that wouldn’t hinder the ones coming up behind me. And there was anger at some of the film language that I was using.

There’s this phrase, the “burden of representation”—I wish I didn’t have to say it, but there’s more than a grain of truth to it, especially when you’re putting films out to your own community. And I think it’s fair to say that when it came out, there was a mixed response...

America has more tolerance for violence in films, and they deal with more overt violence. In England, there’s a lot more “politeness”; our police aren’t armed. The first screening we had in America was at the Pan-African Film Festival, which is a very responsive place—it was like chalk and cheese compared to England. In England there was this sense that [the violence] didn’t quite go on like that, whereas in America there’s never been any delusion that those kinds of things don’t happen. In Nigeria, that was a much more positive response. *Terrordome* really worked at the three different points of the Transatlantic triangle in different ways.

Over the years, what kind of space has *Terrordome* taken up in your mind?

It took three, four years from when it started to when we were on this circuit, so by then I was also interested in making different types of films. On the one hand, I’d made my “angry film,” but I wanted to keep hold of that, especially since women aren’t supposed to be that angry. I wasn’t going to be moved aside in terms of that. I always wanted to make visual storytelling that referenced African story traditions informed by what happened in my life in Britain and in interacting with America. Those things have run through all the work that I’ve done.

It's now 2026 and the film is coming back into the world in a big way. Can you speak to its resonance in a contemporary world?

Basically, *Terrordome* disappeared and would appear occasionally at festivals and in repertory programs. But there was a real revival of interest in the film during the Black Lives Matter era in 2020. It was a combination of COVID and Black Lives Matter.

Terrordome resonated so clearly: As in the film, terrible incidents were happening one after the other, including the murder of George Floyd. These things have always been going on, but now people had phones and the news was more concentrated. At this point, there was new outreach from much younger filmmakers, and people who revisited the reviews from when it had originally come out and re-interviewed me and wrote about it. *Terrordome* was supposed to be the very worst that could happen, all in one night, and twenty-five years later, instead of things getting better, *Terrordome* could almost be seen as somehow lighter. In the real world, you had policemen kneeling, choking, killing people on camera, smiling while they were doing it. These events somehow de-extreme'd *Terrordome*.

It's raw in the best way, and the word that came to mind was vindication.

With *Terrordome*, it's bad to be vindicated. That's not why I made it. I made it with a sense of hope. I really thought that if people saw things that were happening, they'd go "My God, this is terrible!" It's very similar to *Coffee Coloured Children*, because interracial relationships are still frowned-on and criticized in the modern world. I'm sick of being vindicated.

When I watch it now, it's clear that I was learning to be a filmmaker. There are certain things, technically, that I question, but you can't mess with it. It is what it is, and what it was meant to be. If I made it again today, I *wouldn't* make it again today. It would be a different film. It's a film of its time, of where I was then and what I wanted to say then.

CAST

Jodie
Black Rad
Chriselle
Jason
Anjela McBride
Spike

Saffron Burrows
Felix Joseph
Sian Martin
Jason Traynor
Suzette Llewellyn
Valentine Noyela

CREDITS

Director
Director Of Photography
Editing
Production Design
Costumes
Producers

Ngozi Onwurah
Alwin H. Kuchler
Liz Webber
Lindi Pankiv, Miraphora Mina
Claire Ditchburn, Fennella Magnus, Sarah Wiltshire
Joel Phiri, Simon Onwurah