

Lifestyle | Features

‘Cook Off’: The Zimbabwe film that defied all odds to reach Netflix

“Seeing myself on Netflix, I have to punch myself every day. Like, is that really me?” asked actress Tendai Chitima, star of the first Zimbabwean feature film acquired by the streaming pioneer. “Cook Off” was shot in 2017, just months before the fall of Zimbabwe’s despotic ex-president Robert Mugabe, whose iron-fisted rule brought the economy to its knees. The romantic comedy had a meagre starting budget of just \$8,000. “It was not like a luxury shoot where you have your own trailer and you are big on wine,” said 29-year-old Chitima, sparkly eyed as she recalled the experience from her parent’s house in Johannesburg, South Africa. “Everything was very minimalistic. We had to get things right the first time or the second time.”

Chitima plays main character Anesu, a single mother too busy making ends meet to pursue her passion for food... until her son and grand-mother sign her up for a reality cooking contest. For the Zimbabwean debutante, making it onto Netflix was a “miracle” given the filming conditions. Most of

“Cook Off” was shot on the set of Zimbabwe’s version of “Top Chef”, which airs on public broadcaster ZBC. “We used the costumes, the set, the cooking pots of Battle of the chefs,” confessed director Tomas Brickhill, referring to a programme now no longer airing. “Without that there would not have been any movie.”

Chitima admitted that none of the cast or crew had yet been paid for their work. Their budget barely covered food for the crew while on set. “At the time there was restriction on (cash) withdrawals,” Brickhill recalled. “Every day we had to source cash,” he said in an interview with AFP, adding that hard to get hold of notes were selling for more than their value on the black market. The daily limit was \$20 (18 euros) — not even enough for bottled water in a country crippled by hyper-inflation. “Other people think we are completely crazy,” he chuckled. “But we have been dealing with it for so long, that is normal for us.” With no running water on set and little cash to spare, the “Cook Off” crew resorted to drinking boiled water from a garden tap.



Tendai Chitima, the lead actress in the Zimbabwean film *Cook Off*, poses for a portrait at her home in Sandton. — AFP

Tear gas

The first days of shooting were also constantly disrupted by power cuts—a regular occurrence—forcing the team to stretch their paltry budget and hire a generator. One day, one of the actresses found herself

choked up in a cloud of tear gas fired to disperse an anti-government protest. “She called and said: ‘I can still come but I am crying and I don’t know if I am going to be able to act because I don’t have a crying scene,’” said Brickhill, smiling at the memory. Despite the challenges, “Cook Off” did not lose its sparkle and “feel good” effect. “Previously I was acting in a lot of TV shows in which my role as a Zimbabwean was either a maid, a prostitute, or I was being trafficked,” said Chitima, who had previously featured only in shorter productions.

“A role in which I could play an empowered character pursuing what she wanted was for me a great opportunity.” “The movie shows the other side of our story,” she added. “That we are resilient and have dreams.” Chitima hoped to eventually star in big budget productions. Meanwhile, the crew and the cast are still awaiting their cheques, after agreeing to deferred payments.—AFP



In this file photo taken on March 29, 1993, US actor Clint Eastwood (center) holds up his two Oscars at the 65th Annual Academy Awards, which he won for Best Director and Best Picture for “Unforgiven.”

Maybe a few movies more?

Clint Eastwood turns 90

Movie legend Clint Eastwood turns 90 on Sunday, but don’t count on the famously stoic and hard-working star of “A Fistful of Dollars” and “Dirty Harry” hanging up his cowboy boots just yet. The multiple Oscar-winning actor-turned-director, who churned out nine films in his 80s, has expressed no desire to retire ahead of the milestone—and in any case, he’s not a fan of birthdays. “We’re just going to do a family thing—very, very calm, very mellow,” his 34-year-old actor son Scott told “Access Hollywood.” “We’ll sneak a cake in there, definitely. He probably won’t like it.”



In this file photo Clint Eastwood poses with the Best Director and Best Motion Picture at the Kodak Theater in Hollywood, California, 27 February, 2005, during the 77th Academy Awards.—AFP photos

Eastwood, born in 1930, has enjoyed a career spanning seven decades and more than 50 films. He last trod the Hollywood red carpet as recently as November, for his Olympic bombing biopic “Richard Jewell.” It was released to mixed reviews—and sparked a backlash over its fictional depiction of a real-life female journalist trading sex for FBI secrets. But Eastwood’s career has weathered greater controversy, from accusations of excessive violence in the spaghetti Western “Dollars” trilogy, fascism in “Dirty Harry” and warmongering in “American Sniper,” to his portrayal of racism in “Gran Torino.”

As well as Oscars for “Unforgiven” and “Million Dollar Baby,” and a lifetime achievement Palme d’Or from the Cannes festival, Eastwood’s back catalog also contains a few critically savaged flops. “I would like to think it rolls off his back... he’s gotten beat up along the way pretty regularly,” Variety senior vice president Tim Gray told AFP. “I think he’s going to keep working as long as he can... he seems to have a creative drive that keeps him going.”

‘Just wants to work’

Known on the Hollywood circuit as polite but reticent as far as small talk or personal details, Eastwood has hinted at future projects, but had not yet confirmed any plans before the coronavirus pandemic shut down all productions in March. In a January interview with Britain’s ITV, Eastwood indicated he was still enjoying plying his trade. “I like doing it, it’s nice to be able to have a paying job,” he told “This Morning.” “I like being in films, I like making films and I started directing films because I thought one day I’m going to look up on screen and say, ‘That’s enough, Eastwood—you’d better do something else.’”

In other interviews, he has expressed confusion as to why luminaries such as Billy Wilder and Frank Capra quit the business at a younger age, and spoken of his desire to keep working as long as he finds projects that are “worth studying.” Despite previously announcing his retirement from acting after 2008’s “Gran Torino,” Eastwood returned in front of camera four years later in “Trouble with the Curve,” and again in 2018’s “The Mule.” “He’s pretty unpredictable,” said Gray, adding: “I get the feeling now, he does what he wants to do.” As well as continuing to oversee his Malpaso Productions, Eastwood—a former mayor of Carmel, California—remains politically engaged, endorsing Michael Bloomberg’s doomed presidential run earlier this year. And as a father of eight children and a grandfather many times over, Eastwood will likely have his hands full Sunday—even if he isn’t asking anyone to “make my day.” “He probably won’t even want us to acknowledge it. He hates his birthday,” daughter Alison told Closer late last year. “I think he just wants to work and enjoy his life but I don’t think he wants to celebrate it... So we’ll see.”—AFP

Julianne Hough and Brooks Laich have split

The couple - who have been quarantining separately amidst the coronavirus lockdown - have confirmed their marriage has come to an end after three years together. In a statement, they said: “We have lovingly and carefully taken the time we have needed to arrive at our decision to separate. We share an abundance of love and respect for one another and will continue to lead with our hearts from that place. We kindly request your compassion and respect for our privacy moving forward.” In the current lockdown, Brooks has been spending time in Idaho whilst Julianne has remained in California.



Julianne Hough and Brooks Laich

Speaking about their time apart, Julianne recently admitted she was having a “magical” time on her own. She said: “I’m really enjoying this time where I can connect to what’s really important in my life. Being on tour for three months and travelling and starting a business ... it’s a lot. So to be able to be home, and stop and pause, and look inward, and connect back to myself has been glorious. I’ve been on my own. My husband is in Idaho doing lots of yard work ... and so we’re kind of doing our separate things right now. But it’s really been a magical time.”

Whilst ice hockey player Brooks Laich added: “There’s a part of me that enjoys isolation and there’s a part of me that just gets drained when I’m around too many people. [His husky] Koda is awesome. I’m up in Idaho, I’m at my house in Idaho. I spend all day outside. I have 10-and-a-half acres here.

“Our property is pretty big. And I’ve just been a mass cleaning of it, everything. Building some rock walls, chainsawing down some trees, clearing brush, you name it.”—BangShowbiz

Forbes drops Kylie Jenner from billionaires list

Kylie Jenner isn’t a billionaire after all, Forbes magazine said Friday as it accused the reality TV star’s family of “inflating the value of her cosmetics business for years.” Forbes declared the 22-year-old a billionaire in March 2019 owing to the popularity of her Kylie Cosmetics brand but has removed her from their list, citing new information. Jenner sold a 51 percent stake in her brand to beauty giant Coty in January for \$600 million in a deal that valued the company at \$1.2 billion. Forbes said in an article published on its website that the fine print of the deal reveals that the business is “significantly smaller and less profitable” than they were led to believe.

It also accused the famous family, of which Kylie is the youngest member, of creating tax returns that were “likely

forged.” (The) unusual lengths to which the Jenners have been willing to go... reveals just how desperate some of the ultra-rich are to look even richer,” the magazine wrote. It said the new information and the impact of COVID-19 on beauty sales led them to believe she is not a billionaire, even although she pocketed an estimated \$340 million after taxes from the sale. She’s not far off though: Forbes estimates that Jenner’s personal fortune is just under \$900 million. Jenner hit back at the magazine on Twitter, accusing it of “a number of inaccurate statements and unproven assumptions.” “I’ve never asked for any title or tried to lie my way there EVER, period,” she wrote.—AFP



In this file photo TV personality Kylie Jenner attends the 2018 MTV Video Music Awards at Radio City Music Hall on August 20, 2018 in New York City.—AFP

Netflix acquires Hollywood’s historic Egyptian Theatre

Netflix completed its purchase of Hollywood’s historic Egyptian Theatre on Friday, helping to confirm the streaming giant’s newfound central position in the movie industry. The Los Angeles theater built in 1922 claims to have hosted Hollywood’s first ever movie premiere—“Robin Hood”—and will be used by Netflix for movie premieres as well as screenings and special events. “The Egyptian Theatre is an incredible part of Hollywood history and has been treasured by the Los Angeles film community for nearly a century,” said Netflix film head Scott Stuber in a statement confirming the deal.

Netflix, which did not reveal the size of its investment, will run the venue jointly with the nonprofit American Cinematheque, which bought the dilapidated theater from city officials in 1996 and renovated it two years later. The Egyptian Theatre’s landmark 1922 premiere of “Robin Hood” saw Charlie Chaplin and movie mogul Cecil B. DeMille join the film’s star Douglas Fairbanks and his wife Mary Pickford at the venue on Hollywood Boulevard. It would later host premieres of other key silent movies from Hollywood’s famed Golden Age, such as “The Gold Rush” and “The Ten Commandments.”

Netflix has spent billions in recent years to lure the industry’s top filmmaking talent, upstaging traditional Tinseltown studios with prestigious titles including “Roma” and “The Irishman.” Last year the streaming giant announced it would use New York’s historic Paris theater, which had been shuttered months earlier, for special events and screenings. The investments have been widely seen as a shot across the bows in Netflix’s battle with major movie theater chains and older Hollywood studios. Traditionally the waiting period before movies appear online agreed upon by studios and major theater chains is 90 days, but Netflix and other streaming giants have been running their movies in select theaters for briefer windows.

The Oscars and other major award shows require films in contention run in designated theaters for a certain period of time, although many have temporarily relaxed their rules this year due to the coronavirus pandemic. Hollywood trade IndieWire reported this week that Netflix will skip traditional major movie festivals this year such as Venice, Toronto and New York—should they take place—preferring to premiere its titles at independent venues. “Love for film is inseparable from L.A.’s history and identity,” said Mayor Eric Garcetti. “We are working toward the day when audiences can return to theaters—and this extraordinary partnership will preserve an important piece of our cultural heritage that can be shared for years to come.”—AFP



In this file photo the sign of Grauman’s Egyptian Theater on Hollywood Boulevard in Hollywood on April 15, 2019.—AFP

Grimes is legally selling a part of her soul in an auction

The 32-year-old singer - who welcomed her and Elon Musk’s son X Æ A-12 earlier this month - has put up a legal document for sale as part of her online art exhibition, with bids starting at \$10 million to own a piece of her soul. She explained: “I didn’t want anyone to buy it, so I said we should just make it \$10 million and then it probably won’t sell... The deeper we got with it, the more philosophically interesting it became. Also, I really wanted to collaborate with my lawyer on art. The idea of fantastical art in the form of legal documents just seems very intriguing to me.”

Elsewhere for sale includes a print illustration titled ‘Seldon Crisis’, which has been listed for \$500 in the auction. The ‘You’ll Miss Me When I’m Not Around’ singer also admitted she has been doing fine art for a long time, way before she even started songwriting and penning hit tracks. Of her art, she told Bloomberg: “I made art 10, 12 years before I ever touched a keyboard. I see myself as a visual artist first and foremost, and I’ve always felt strange that people know me for music.”—BangShowbiz