

Samira's Dream (Ndoto Ya Samira) (2022): Living and Learning Against the Odds

A Documentary Film Review

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Samira is a young Zanzibari woman who had a big dream. To leave home, have a family and study for a career. In many countries this is done as a matter of course. However, in some places there are many struggles and difficulties, both social and financial, that must be faced.

In Samira's Dream, we follow Samira over a period of seven years as she grows and develops without losing sight of her objectives. The length of time taken to make this documentary reminded me of the fictional film Boyhood which is made and takes place over a period of 12 years, an accomplishment [whereby](#) "we watch the actors getting older for real, which gives their characters a sense of authenticity."

The same can be said for Samira's Dream as we see the difficulties and real problems she faces over the years, where even being filmed exerted so much pressure at one point that she asks for it to be stopped. She was never sure that she could overcome all the problems she encountered along the way, and the sometimes tense atmosphere during the filming added to the authenticity. As the film's director Nino Tropiano [noted](#): "Werner Herzog said that filmmaking is not about aesthetics, it is about athletics. In other words, you have to work hard."

Samira's Dream (Ndoto Ya Samira) (2022) – Trailer

This is easy to forget in an age where everyone seems to be constantly taking selfies and filming themselves doing the most insignificant things. Having a documentary made about you would be many teenagers' greatest fantasy and desire. Yet, in societies where liberal freedoms cannot be taken for granted, and your dreams are not easily accomplished (especially for women), there is no sure ending.

Samira gets knocked down, and she gets up again, and again. She works hard, gets help wherever she can, and has the support of a husband who (although anxious about the effect her high level of education might have on their marriage) still gives her wishes his blessing.

For Tropiano this long project was not like Michelangelo's sculpture where a start had already been made on the block of marble he fashioned into David. The film took shape very gradually, as Tropiano [explains](#):

"Here I am thinking where will I start? I called a friend of mine who had spent a few months in Zanzibar. Where is that!? A traditional Muslim society. That's intriguing. One of her photos in particular, struck me. A group of young female students walking out of a madrassa in a very orderly manner. It was then I knew the subject matter for my film – female education. So, I needed to write down a synopsis of some sort. I imagined a young woman coming from a remote village, who dreams of moving to town to get a college education. By following her life, I would have a film."

Even when Tropiano arrived there, he still did not have a subject for his documentary. A chance meeting with a friendly group of schoolgirls led to some general interviews and his [choice](#) of Samira for "her natural charisma, open-minded attitude, and cheerful approach". Diplomacy then ensued as he had to gain the trust of the local people, the Shia Leader of the community, and the teachers in town. Over the next 7 years, a friendship built up which allowed for a constant revisiting and filming that made for a much deeper story than a single visit would have told. By keeping a low-key profile he was able to fly below state officialdom and keep costs down. Over the years Tropiano was able to gain the confidence of the people, demonstrated by the relaxed humour and friendly disposition of the protagonists while, at the same time, capturing the natural beauty of the landscape and the colourful clothes of the people in some beautiful photography.

Nino Tropiano came to Ireland in the mid-90s where he graduated from the National Film School in Dublin with a 50-minute film entitled *My Daughter Does Madonna*. He went on to direct and produce *Mary's Last Show*, *Class Reunion* and a short film called *The Fall*. Later his documentary *Chippers* (2008) was awarded Best Documentary Memorie Migranti at Gualdo Tadino in 2010.

Chippers: The story of the Italian community in Ireland



[Click here to view the video](#)

Even though fish and chips is an English fast food tradition, by a strange quirk of fate it was mainly Italians who set up the fish and chip shops all over Ireland. Tropiano delves into the history of the Italian peasant farmers who sought work abroad and ended up selling English traditional food to the Irish. Irish efforts to mimic the business soon discovered that selling fish and chips was hard work with very long and unsociable hours.

Tropiano's ability to be a fly-on-the-wall and let ordinary people tell their own story is very evident in *Chippers* and this style of filmmaking pays off handsomely in *Samira's Dream*. With a minimal voiceover, much of the narrative is conveyed in Samira's own words.

His own struggles to get funding, the difficulties of getting to Zanzibar and the problems of production and editing, could have led him to give up the project altogether. He [notes](#):

"Each time I got turned down when I applied for funds, I faced an existential crisis, followed by an upsurge that fed in me the ability to see things in perspective. In hindsight, things went the way they were meant to."

However, Tropiano is also aware of Western tropes, a trap whereby authors/filmmakers/artists make themselves the centre of their own work and lose sight of their [original](#) intention: "I faced many obstacles along the way and I suspect that in the hands of other filmmakers, Samira's story would have come second with the focus shifted towards the struggling life of a filmmaker trying to tell a story in Africa. I resisted the temptation to put myself into the film, to narrate some thrilling backstories in fear they might divert from Samira's quest into the unedifying and morally bankrupt African tale Western audiences generally look for and festivals tend to love and give awards to."

This predicament faced by the artist is discussed by the writer James Joyce who discusses creativity (in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*) in terms of the developing maturity of the the artist:

“The image, it is clear, must be set between the mind or senses of the artist himself and the mind or senses of others. If you bear this in memory you will see that art necessarily divides itself into three forms progressing from one to the next. These forms are: the lyrical form, the form wherein the artist presents his image in immediate relation to himself; the epical form, the form wherein he presents his image in mediate relation to himself and to others; the dramatic form, the form wherein he presents his image in immediate relation to others.”

Tropiano moves away from making his art about himself, or about his encounters with others. He takes himself out of the equation while guiding his project in such a way that it becomes a story that the real hero, Samira, can take centre place in, all the while providing inspiration for many women who aspire to achieve similar educational goals.

It is so easy in Western society to fulfill the role of the individualist, Romantic hero telling of his adventures far away from home in distant lands. Western cinema is full of heroes and superheroes, but to create something which turns an ordinary local into an extraordinary example and symbol is a real achievement in art.

Back in Zanzibar at a music and film festival, *Samira's Dream* (*Ndoto Ya Samira* in Swahili) was to be screened. After two hours of dancing to live music Tropiano was called to the stage to [speak](#):

“I prepared a little speech in Swahili and the crowd jeered at my blunders. Then magic happened. There were about six hundred people, and they sat, remaining glued to the screen till the end. That was my reward: I realised the film deserves to be promoted and be seen as it creates a true sense of awareness in Tanzania.”

Samira's Dream is a story that takes us through the hardships and joys of life, over a timescale that is a rare experience in cinema and which demonstrates dedication to a craft and an idea which takes time to be perfected and achieved so well.

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