



LONDON

Doug Fishbone

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CAN A SINGLE PROJECT be both credible Conceptual art and successful popular entertainment? Would such a project fully satisfy its different audiences? These are some of the issues raised by Doug Fishbone's 2010 feature film *Elmina*. Funded, at the artist's request, by three Western collectors and shot in Ghana by the TV- and movie-production company Revele Films, *Elmina* is virtually an all-African enterprise except for one significant detail: Fishbone has the lead role. He plays Ato Blankson, a farmer who stands up against the village chief's decision to sell his people's oil-rich land to Chinese investors.

New York-born, London-based—and white—Fishbone is an unlikely hero for this local drama. But the script, cowritten by director Emmanuel Apea Jr. and his brother John Apea (who also plays one of the main characters), never refers to Fishbone/Ato's ethnicity. The character is impossible to pin down. Is Ato supposed to be white or black? Does it matter? No one would argue against a nonwhite Hamlet. Perhaps the same should be true of a nonblack Ghanaian character. Watching *Elmina*, the suspension of disbelief immediately kicks in. Still, an uncomfortable historical subtext remains: One link between the American artist and the African crew is their shared language, English, a hangover from the British colonization in Ghana; *Elmina* is one port where white men first came to West Africa.

Elmina is being launched in the mainstream Ghanaian cinema network this month with a red-carpet event in Accra, where its stellar cast—including Kofi Bucknor, Akorfa Asiedu, and Ama K. Abebrese—will no doubt attract crowds. The film is available as a limited-edition artwork and will be distributed as a cheap DVD on the African and British markets, highlighting the different ways a cultural product can be appreciated and consumed. As writer/actor John Apea has pointed out, *Elmina* also addresses a crucial reality in today's West Africa: the shift from Western to Eastern colonial exploitation. Two questions remain: how the movie will be received in its place of production by a public that, unlike the British audience, is savvy about West African cinema, and whether Fishbone's performance (and indeed endeavor) will be as convincing in Accra as it has been in London.

—C.M.

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Doug Fishbone
Elmina, 2010.
Production stills.



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