

Kenya Merits Co-Star Status in 'Constant Gardener': Rick Warner

(Interview. Rick Warner is the movie critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

By Rick Warner

Aug. 19 (Bloomberg) -- Ralph Fiennes and Rachel Weisz are billed as the co-stars of 'The Constant Gardener,' a masterful film adaptation of John le Carre's novel about love, murder and corruption in Africa. The real star, though, is Kenya and its people.

The movie, which opens in the U.S. on Aug. 31, paints a far different picture of Kenya than 1985 Oscar-winner 'Out of Africa' and other Hollywood pictures that have focused on the bucolic beauty and big-game animals of the East African nation.

By shooting scenes in Kibera, a sprawling shantytown in the capital of Nairobi, Brazilian director Fernando Meirelles gives us a glimpse of the desperation and destitution endured by millions of Kenyans.

'I've never seen poverty on that level ever in my life,' said Weisz, who plays a crusading activist killed for trying to uncover a conspiracy by British officials and a giant pharmaceutical company to use Kenyans as guinea pigs for unproven drugs. 'It's very extreme: no sanitation, no running water and a very high level of disease.'

Unscripted Scenes

Despite their hardships, Kenyans welcomed the film crew and treated them like family. Some scenes were improvised with local residents who weren't even aware that a movie was being made.

'They were so generous and hospitable,' Weisz said during a recent promotional tour in New York with Fiennes and Meirelles. 'The scene where the children say, 'How are you? How are you?' -- that's just what happened. That wasn't in the script and they weren't extras.'

Originally, producer Simon Channing Williams wanted to shoot in South Africa, which has better facilities for making movies. But Meirelles, who earned an Oscar nomination as best director for 'City of God,' convinced him to film the African scenes in Kenya. (Other parts of the Focus Features production were shot in England and Germany.)

'We couldn't have done the same film in South Africa, especially the scenes in the market and the streets,' Meirelles said. 'It was all shot with a small crew, using real people in real life. We couldn't get that in South Africa.'

Charity Fund

Fiennes plays Weisz's widower, a reserved British diplomat who sets out to find the truth behind his wife's death after officials try to pin it on a missing African doctor who was her traveling companion.

Fiennes, who received Oscar nominations for ``The English Patient'' and ``Schindler's List,'' said he enjoyed improvising scenes with the locals.

``I loved being thrown into situations I didn't expect,'' he said. ``There were some scenes where I'm talking to people on the street and in the marketplace which were shot with no rehearsal. I learned a few lines of Swahili, and I didn't know where the camera was.''

While researching her role, Weisz met a woman who was working as an AIDS counselor in Kibera.

``She was incredibly generous and allowed me to accompany her on house calls around the shantytown,'' she said. ``Meeting the people of Africa was my real inspiration.''

Unlike some filmmakers who go to Third World countries, do their work and leave nothing behind, the cast, crew and producers of ``The Constant Gardener'' have tried to help the impoverished people they befriended in Kenya. They set up the Constant Gardener Trust, which is funding bridges, roads, schools and water projects for the residents of Kenyan slums.

``We just wanted to say thank you to the people there,'' Weisz said.

--Editors: Hoelterhoff, Schatz, West.

Story illustration: For more information on ``The Constant Gardener,'' see <http://www.theconstantgardener.com>. For more cultural news from Bloomberg, see {MUSE <GO>}.

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