

The Last Tree [15] 2019 | UK | 98 mins

UK release date **27 September 2019**

Director **Shola Amoo**

Screenplay **Shola Amoo**

Cinematography **Stil Williams**

Music **Segun Akinola**

Cast **Sam Adewunmi** (Femi); **Gbemisola Ikumelo** (Yinka); **Denise Black** (Mary); **Tai Golding** (younger Femi); **Nicholas Pinnock** (Mr Williams); **Ruthxjiah Bellenea** (Tope)

Writer-director Shola Amoo's "semi-autobiographical" second feature is an affecting coming-of-age tale pitched somewhere between the sublime American poetry of Barry Jenkins's *Moonlight* and the streetwise British grit of Noel Clarke and Menhaj Huda's *Kidulthood* movies. *The Last Tree* bristles with film-making confidence, plunging us into the world of its young protagonist as he struggles to find his place in a strangely changing environment. Powerful performances, tactile visuals and an elegantly fluid score add to the impact of this impressively understated yet profoundly moving tale.

We open in Lincolnshire, with a scene of bucolic beauty reminiscent of the dreamy field-of-corn sequence in Lynne Ramsay's *Ratcatcher*. Here, 11-year-old Femi (Tai Golding), a British boy of Nigerian heritage, lives with his English foster mother Mary (Denise Black) in an apparently idyllic existence.

All of this is brought to an abrupt end by the arrival of Femi's birth mother Yinka (Gbemisola Ikumelo), who says she is ready to take her son "home". Femi soon finds himself transported to the high-rise flats of south London, where the phosphorescent glare of urban existence replaces the honeydew haze of his former life. It's a jolting change, to which Femi reacts with a heartbreaking mix of anguished insularity and barely contained anger and confusion.

Fast-forward to the teenage Femi, now played by Sam Adewunmi, negotiating a complex path between school studies and street life. When local hood Mace (Demmy Ladipo) begins circling Femi, another possible life-path opens up before him, and his studies start to falter. Meanwhile, schoolteacher Mr Williams (Nicholas Pinnock), recognising the conflict in Femi's life, attempts to break

through the barriers that this intelligent but troubled pupil is building round himself.

I thought I detected echoes of Chris Doyle's shimmering work for Wong Kar-wai in Stil Williams's terrifically expressive cinematography. Widescreen, hand-held closeups and the regular use of slow-mo place us inside Femi's experience, with the super-saturated colours of those early Lincolnshire scenes contrasting with the starker hues of London life and the emotional melee of a late-in-the-day trip to Lagos. Each location has its own distinct personality but everything is filtered through Femi's changing frame of mind, with visual nods to the iconic final scene of Truffaut's *Les Quatre Cents Coups* and a sly invocation of Spike Lee's trademark "gliding walk" dolly shots.

Sound design plays a crucial role, too, with Femi's fractured worldview dramatised through a richly textured mosaic of noise that slips from closeup voices and amplified ambient creaks to muffled booms giving the impression of being submerged underwater. It's as if we can hear the blood rushing in Femi's ears as he wrestles with self-definition.

Completing the picture is a spellbinding score from Segun Akinola that perfectly captures the tonal shifts of the drama – from the rapturous warmth and tenderness of a romantically remembered youth to the almost science fiction-inflected alienation of urban teenage angst. Akinola (best known to some for his work on *Doctor Who*) is clearly completely in tune with the director, striking just the right note of internalised anguish and ecstasy that defines this tender, heartfelt and clearly very personal movie.

After: **Mark Kermode**, *The Observer*, 29 Sep 2019

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