

Colours of the Alphabet – Filmhouse

✘ *Colours of the Alphabet*, a documentary film born out of a PhD at the University of Edinburgh, is the colourful tale of three Zambian children and their families, and asks the question ‘Does the future have to be in English?’ In conjunction with the Africa in Motion festival, Edinburgh’s Filmhouse hosted a stimulating Q&A screening of the documentary with the director Alastair Cole on Friday 27 May.

Like all good mothers and fathers across the world, the parents of Mubarak, Steward and Eliza, hope that education will deliver a better future for their children. However, issues of communication can affect this, with many tribal languages spoken within the country, seven main languages and the official language, English.

But in a country where only 2% of all Zambians speak English in their adult working life, is English really the passport to a better future? Or is it perhaps the only means to bind a nation of 72 tribal languages together?

Saturated in colour, depicting the vibrant culture of Zambia, it often seems more effective for the population to communicate through colour, song and dance, evocative universal languages. Humbling the audience from the offset with an inspirational quote about language from the prolific Nelson Mandela, opting for caption narration instead of voiceover, the film consistently questions communication from the very beginning.

Colours of the Alphabet is an 80 minute observational documentary that chronologically follows three Zambian children and their families over a period of nine months year as they enter the formal education system for the very first time.

Filmed in a rural village over three hours outside the nation's capital, Lusaka, the film captures the parent's ambitions and the children's bemused struggle as they begin to experience the world anew in the classroom, learning not only the English words for money, toilet and parts of the body but also the concepts of holidays, science and perhaps most tellingly, the Zambian national anthem.

Offering an intimate and often amusing portrait of three families in one village, *Colours of the Alphabet* captures in microcosm what is a national and global predicament – what are the consequences of educating a multi-lingual and multi-cultural population in a foreign tongue? There is a definite sense of frustration throughout the documentary, simply evoked by the shots of the ill-motivated children in the classroom, as the teacher is attempting to learn them “heads, shoulders, knees and toes.”

Director Alastair Cole has made two previous successful documentary shorts around the questions of language and understanding. In *Do You Really Love Me?* (Cannes Critics Week 2011) he explores the expression of intimacy between couples neither of whom share a language in common. In his second film, *Pikku Kalle?* (Cannes Critics Week 2012) he explores the linguistic borderlands of humour as residents in the Turku archipelago located between Finland and Sweden share jokes about each other, giving the same words very different meanings.

Despite the issue being interesting, relevant and wonderfully depicted the title of the documentary opens up notions of colour and communication, and more could have been explored on this note, with a country so inherent in a colourful culture. Pride and patriotism have been glorified in this documentary; it would have been a little clearer if they had highlighted the colour of communication by more than simply changing that of the subtitles, depending on the tribal language spoken. But, a stimulating evening all the same.