



‘My Father’s Shadow’ Review: Nigeria’s First Ever Cannes Selection Marks a Miraculous Gem of Autofiction’

In his feature film debut, director Akinola Davies Jr. announces himself as a major cinematic voice

My Father’s Shadow

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“My Father’s Shadow” pulls off a miraculous, double-edged feat with a rather simple structure. The film, written by brothers Akinola and Wale Davies and directed by the former, spans one day in the life of two young boys traveling with their father from a small village in rural Nigeria to the bustling capital city Lagos. However, as the audience is taken in by this intimate and well-observed drama, the rug gets pulled from beneath them by revealing the violence and strife that was simmering underneath. It’s a trick so devastating that it completely upends the movie, elevating it into a deeply humanist narrative.

As shown in opening scenes, the two brothers, Akin and Remi, have a playful, antagonistic relationship with each other, as most brothers close in age do. There’s love, one-upmanship and slight resentment. Their bond is further deepened by their mutual admiration for their father, Florian (Şopé Dìrísù). That’s immediately evident in the way their manner becomes quieter and more reserved when they are around him. They don’t see much of him since he’s earning a living in the capital. This distance adds reverence to how the kids see their father; he’s more of a mythical figure in their eyes than their parent.

While their mother is away at work, Florian takes his sons with him for a day trip to Lagos. He’s going to collect his wages. On the way, their bus breaks down and they have to hitchhike. Once in Lagos, they meet a few people, strange to the children but who seem familiar with Florian. They take a trip to the beach. Florian isn’t able to see his boss and collect his money. All of this is presented in thoughtfully written scenes that always foreground the characters rather than the story’s plot points. The screenplay is attuned to how children can interpret the alien world of adults. The camera watches all that’s happening from the open-hearted, but slightly confused gaze of the young brothers.

This story, written by two brothers and made by two brothers, is semi-autobiographical. That authentic historical context is further enhanced by setting the film on the day that the results of the tumultuous 1993 Nigerian election are announced.

Florian, and some of the people he interacts with, are hopeful. They see a change coming. Yet TVs and radios keep announcing

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news of unrest, of opposition revolts being brutally crushed by the army. Hope is replaced with dread. The

storytelling always remains within the POV of the boys, never revealing more than they would understand, adding emotional potency to the narrative.

Meanwhile, Florian is a creation of cinematic beauty. The Davies brothers have crafted a father of mythic proportions. He's an object of idolatry, as any father is in the eyes of his children. Dirísù, in a revelatory performance that should put him at the top of casting lists, grounds that fantasy with a realistically intense but quiet performance. He plays the father both as a romanticized vision, seen through the eyes of his boys, and as a man going through a tough time in his life, trying to juggle multiple responsibilities to his family, work and country.

There are allusions that Florian has been, or may still be, politically active. He's stopped by more than one person as he travels through Lagos. His young boys see the respect these men give him, and the leadership he commands effortlessly. They also watch how women react to his confident sexy demeanor. This offers Dirísù many volatile colors to his performance: rage, desire, humiliation, helplessness, bravery — all of it simmering below every composed sentence he utters and every measured movement he takes.

The filmmakers' other master stroke is in casting brothers Chibuike Marvellous Egbo and Godwin Egbo to play Akin and Remi respectively. There is a natural and effortless authenticity to their interactions, whether they are loving or contentious to one another. Is it because they are instinctively gifted actors or because they are actual brothers? Both. Though ultimately, it doesn't matter because their synchronized performances give the film a jolt of effortless grace. As if by being so natural and at ease together, they are boosting the film's already acutely felt authenticity.

By Murtada Elfadl, Variety
Reviewed from the 2025 Cannes Film Festival
18 May 2025

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