

Makibefo

UK, 2000 – 73 mins (B&W)

Alexander Abela

In October 1998, English-born oceanographer-turned-film-maker Alexander Abela and Danish sound recorderist Jeppe Jungersen arrived with 350kg of equipment in Faux Cap, a remote fishing village on the southern tip of Continent Island, Madagascar. The villagers, members of the Antandroy tribe, had never seen a film, nor heard of Shakespeare; yet they agreed to take part in an adaptation of *Macbeth*, and had a huge influence in shaping its scenario. Abela completed post-production in 2000 and the following year French critics acclaimed this stunning feature debut on its limited theatrical release.

It alternates between scenes in the Antandroy's Malagasy dialect and bridging extracts from *Macbeth*, delivered in English to camera or in voiceover in a thick French accent by a narrator (the lean, handsome Gilbert Laumord, from Guadeloupe), who sits on a beach beside four thin totem poles and also delivers an English-language Prologue summarising the story.

Makibefo (the tall, intimidating Martin) and his younger friend, Bakoua, recapture a fugitive traitor, Kidoure, and meet a witchdoctor who promises Makibefo glory before metamorphosing into a snake. The peace and harmony created by venerable, grey-haired King Danikany are threatened when his hot-headed son Malikomy defies his father and executes Kidoure, precisely as the witchdoctor has foretold.

The King and his young warriors dine with Makibefo and his wife, bringing long-horned Zebu oxen as reward for his loyalty. His wife, who has eagerly embraced the prophecy and drugged her guests, cannot abide her husband's hesitation and is about to stab the King when Makibefo takes the dagger from her, ushers her outside and strikes (as with all the violence, we see the blows fall but not land).

(Opposite page) Makibefo (Martin) emerges after killing his king, Danikany, in Alexander Abela's *Makibefo*



Makidofy discovers the murder, Malikomy flees by boat and Bakoua is killed on Makibefo's orders in a sequence reminiscent of the assassination of Colonel Kurtz and the slaughter of the water buffalo at the end of *Apocalypse Now* (1979), as Abela cuts between Bakoua's murder and the sacrifice of a Zebu ox (killed in the director and Jungersen's honour, rather than as a pre-scripted incident). Makibefo holds the ox's head aloft and cries 'I am your new King!'

Soon afterwards, his hysterical reaction to Bakoua's ashen-faced ghost disrupts a relaxed village dinner, attended by men, women and children and a fine example of how Abela (as in 2004's *Souli*, p. 184) creates a vivid, documentary sense of community. He has written that although *Makibefo* is a costume drama, with the villagers wearing simple clothing of a type last worn by their ancestors more than fifty years ago (today they wear jeans or T-shirts), it also depicts aspects of contemporary life in *Faux Cap*.

The village's unhurried pace determines Abela's leisurely direction (he is content to hold for seconds on a character's progress across a beach, and fades to lingering black between some scenes) and the village intimacy, compared to the nationwide scope of, say, Polanski's *Macbeth*, is turned to dramatic advantage. With everyone living so close together, *Makibefo* need not send men to raid Makidofy's home; he and a warrior can stroll there in minutes. He hauls his enemy's wife, baby and two young boys to the shore as Makidofy flees, gloatingly yells 'Look!' and Makidofy glances back from his canoe to see all four butchered.

Swiftly abandoned by the rest of the villagers, and widowed by his wife's suicide, Makibefo confronts Malikomy and Makidofy's twelve-strong landing party on the beach, dancing defiance until he lays down his spear and accepts death.

Even though Makibefo and his wife speak no more than 300 words between them, the imagery movingly articulates their dehumanising journeys. Abela shows that 'the milk of human kindness' initially flows through Makibefo's veins by having him gently salve Kidoure's spear wound, and balances the couple's brutality with marital tenderness,

notably when Makibefo comforts her sleepless guilt: 'Calm yourself . . . come back to bed.' This complements the moving addition of two women not in *Macbeth*: Kidoure's wife, who begs Danikany to spare her husband and howls over his corpse, and Danikany's wife, traumatised by seeing the murdered King.

The villagers' artless 'performances', the spare dialogue and the storyteller device all help turn Shakespearean tragedy into morality play, and in this context the Narrator's use of complex Jacobean imagery feels more effective as commentary for scenes without dialogue than at the occasionally jarring moments when simple, subtitled Malagasy segues directly into Shakespeare.

Above all, this is a film of intense visual and aural contrasts: black skin against clear skies, pristine white sand and robes; the soothing background of waves lapping the shore juxtaposed against the awful sound of metal tearing flesh.

Dir/Prod/Scr/DOP: Alexander Abela, in collaboration with Jeppe Jungersen; Editor: Douglas Bryson; Score: Bien Rasoanan Tenaina; Main Cast: Martin (Makibefo), Noeliny (Makibefo's wife), Randria Arthur (Bakoua), Jean-Felix (Danikany), Bien Rasoanan Tenaina (Malikomy), Jean-Noël (Makidofy), Boniface (Kidoure), Victor (Witchdoctor), Gilbert Laumord (Narrator).