



Tall As the Baobab tree

"Courageous and true"
-Filmmaker Magazine

"Quietly eloquent"
-Variety

"A grand cinematic experience"
-Hollywood news

"A marvel to watch"
-British Film Institute



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A powerful voice from Africa's young generation, *Tall as the Baobab Tree* poignantly depicts a family struggling to find its footing at the outer edge of the modern world ...where questions of right and wrong are not always black and white.



An exquisitely performed and beautifully photographed drama that is a marvel to watch” *BFI Film Institute, Keith Shiri*

“Teicher’s quietly eloquent first fiction film... [combines] the artlessness of documentary with the aesthetic unity of fiction.” *Ronnie Scheib, Variety*

“... smart, rhythmic..great sound track...impressive cutting...He’s [Jeremy Teicher] a director to watch.” *Brandon Harris, Filmmaker Magazine*

“★★★★A grand cinematic experience” *The Hollywood News*

PRESS

Inspired by true stories from director Jeremy's Teicher's 2011 [Student Academy Award-nominated](#) documentary, selected as finalist in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' 38th Annual Student Academy Awards competition.

“ Like the panoramas of Peter Weir or the lovingly crafted mis en scène of Jean Pierre Jeunet... it echoes such dramas as THE REMAINS OF THE DAY or SENSE AND SENSIBILITY... **a grand cinematic experience** which is very much worth your time, for it is **a fine demonstration of how a film can be so small and so large, so sorrowful and so uplifting at the same time.** ★★★★★” [The Hollywood News](#)

“ A remarkable first feature by 23-year old American filmmaker... **a sensitive, beautifully shot** study of the collision of youth and tradition.” [BFI Film Festival Interview](#)

“It's a story that keeps your attention to the end... it's **a delight.**” [UK One World](#)

“An exquisitely performed and beautifully photographed drama that is a marvel to watch.”

Keith Shiri, British Film Institute

“**Beautifully photographed and subtly observed**...rich in the picture it paints... low key yet stirringly effective.” [Glass Magazine UK](#)

“... **a film full of heart, and a powerful piece of cinema.**” [EatSleepLiveFilm](#)

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Rotterdam (IFFR) 2013 Audience Awards: Tall as the Boabab Tree ranks in [TOP TWENTY](#) out of over 170 films.

“...**smart, rhythmic ... great soundtrack, impressive cutting and an ending that is courageous** a sign of a rare maturity for a neophyte [director] just coming into his own. **He's [Jeremy Teicher] a director to watch.**” [Filmmaker Magazine](#)

“Teicher's **quietly eloquent** first fiction film... [combines] the artlessness of documentary with the aesthetic unity of fiction... Chris Collin's serene lensing highlights the family's closeness and its connection to the environment, while Jay Wadley's African harp score adds to the pic's authenticity.” [Variety](#)

“a **subtle, skilfully photographed** portrait of a strong young woman who is caught between tradition and progress...the film **looks more African than most truly African films.**” [Gertjan Zuilhof, International Film Festival Rotterdam](#)

“a **beautifully restrained and heartfelt film that deserves to be widely seen.**” ★★★★★ “ [One Stop Arts](#)

“a **painterly sensibility**...creating a **stunningly shot, universally relevant and important film.**” [FlickFeast](#)

“... there's a **truthful simplicity** to the filmmaking and the performances that's **quietly winning.**” [Cinetalk London](#)

“A subtle story of **sisterly love**...” [View of the Arts](#)

“One of our **top 10 for 2012**” [Movie Arts Film Journal](#)



SYNOPSIS

In a rural African village poised at the outer edge of the modern world, a teenage girl hatches a secret plan to rescue her 11-year-old sister from an arranged marriage.

Inspired by true stories.
From Student Academy
Award nominated director
Jeremy Teicher.

Coumba and her little sister Debo are the first to leave their family's remote African village, where meals are prepared over open fires and water is drawn from wells, to attend school in the bustling city.

But when an accident suddenly threatens their family's survival, their father decides to sell 11-year-old Debo into an arranged marriage. Torn between loyalty to her elders and her dreams for the future, Coumba hatches a secret plan to rescue her young sister from a fate she did not choose.

The movie was shot on location in a rural Senegalese village without electricity and features local villagers playing roles that mirror their actual lives. It is the first international feature film in the colloquial Pulaar language.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT



“Tall as the Baobab Tree is about standing up for your beliefs and doing what you feel is right, no matter what.

To me, the film speaks to the energy and idealism of youth while portraying a very stark and realistic world where change is two steps forward and one step back, where the invincibility of youth bends beneath the harsh realities of life – but is not stamped out.”

Jeremy Teicher, Director

When I first visited the village of Sinthiou Mbadane, Senegal, the trip by horse cart traversed through wide open fields that stretched uninterrupted across the horizon. After turning off the paved roads, the concrete houses of the city would melt away, giving in to rolling hills populated only by massive baobab trees. Clusters of straw huts would eventually pop up between the trees, surrounded by herds of cows. This was Sinthiou Mbadane. Even though it was only a few miles from the city, it felt like a completely separate world.

Village life is now in the midst of a transformation. A new generation, with access to school for the first time in history, is coming of age. Roads from the city stretch deeper into the countryside and straw huts are steadily being replaced by new, concrete buildings.

I wanted to tell a story that captures the emotions of the old and new worlds colliding. *Tall as the Baobab Tree* explores the tensions, quiet victories, and heartbreaks that come with this change.

10 INTERESTING FACTS

1. TALL AS THE BAOBAB TREE was filmed on location in the village of Sinthiou Mbadane, Senegal. Equipment was transported on horse carts across unpaved roads to the village that has no electricity or running water.
2. The film blends reality with fiction: the actors are all local villagers, and the story of the film is inspired by their lives and the experiences of their friends and family. Real-life sisters play the two main characters.
3. The director worked in the village for several years before the making of TALL AS THE BAOBAB TREE. Previously, he collaborated with local students on a documentary about education and daily life titled THIS IS US, nominated for a Student Academy Award in 2011.
4. The students who worked with the director were the first villagers to ever attend school. Their village school was built in the year 2000 and has grown to accommodate nearly 250 students.
5. The cast of actors worked with the director to develop a fictional script that spoke to their true personal experiences. The resulting story reflects the social change that school as brought to their village.
6. The local actors improvised the dialogue based off of a written plot outline. The director re-wrote the plot daily, based on the improvised performances.
7. TALL AS THE BAOBAB TREE is the first international feature film performed in the colloquial Pulaar language, an ethnic language spoken mainly across West Africa.
8. The director was 22 years old when production on TALL AS THE BAOBAB TREE began -- only a few years older than the students who inspired the story. He is now 24. TALL AS THE BAOBAB TREE is his first feature film.
9. Composed by Jay Wadley, much of the music in the movie is played by Salieu Suso on a traditional West African 21 string Kora harp. Salieu Suso was born into a family of traditional musicians that extends back nearly 1000 years.
10. Our story, performances, and pacing are all designed to convey the rhythms and essence of life in a rural African village, where meals are cooked over open fires and water is drawn from wells.

TALL AS THE BAOBAB TREE's simplicity presents a stark contrast to the complexities of our lives in the developed world. Fundamentally different from mainstream cinema—it “breaks” conventional movie structure and pacing in order to truly capture the heart and soul of village life during a time when ancient traditions are conflicting with modern society for the first time.



Q&A with DIRECTOR

What inspired this film and how was the story developed?

Tall as the Boabab Tree builds on work I began in 2009, when I traveled to Senegal to direct an independent documentary titled *This Is Us*, nominated for a Student Academy Award in 2011.

I worked with a group of first-generation students from the small village of Sinthiou Mbadane, using pocket video cameras to create short stories about their everyday lives. One of the students, a teenager named Dior, shared a story about the girls in her village who are forced to marry between the ages of 8 and 12. As the first generation with access to formal education, Dior and her peers are divided between those whose parents sent them to school and those whose parents chose to follow the deep-rooted tradition of arranged marriage. Dior's experience living between the world of school and the world of tradition deeply resonated with me.

After *This Is Us* was released, Dior and I kept in touch. We worked together, along with some of the other students, to develop a fictional script that spoke to their personal experiences on the leading end of this cultural change. Through a narrative story, we felt we could most effectively capture the emotions of the old and new worlds colliding.

Q&A CONTINUED

What was it like working with non-actors who had never even watched a TV show or a movie?

The cast is made up of local villagers playing roles that mirror their own lives: the two main characters, Coumba and her sister Debo, are played by real-life sisters who actually are the first kids from their family to go to school. The role of the mother is played by a local woman who was herself a young bride.

Tall as the Baobab Tree's strength is rooted in its performances. Our cast's improvisational approach culminates in a dramatic and uniquely authentic ensemble performance, with scenes often resulting in spontaneous truthful moments that blur the lines between fiction and reality.

You were making your first feature film in rural Africa. How did that go?

Beginning with the ritual slaughter of a goat for good luck – as recommended by the village elders – principle photography started in early July 2011 in a remote village about 2 hours south of Dakar (don't worry, the goat was cooked and eaten later that day). The village has no electricity or running water. It is typical of rural areas, home to the majority of the African population.

As we traveled by horse cart to the village every morning, I wondered if filming my first feature length narrative at such a challenging location was an act of total naiveté. But in the end, the openness of the villagers, the beauty of the landscape, and our desire to tell this story far outweighed the challenging logistical concerns.

Why make the first feature film in the local dialect of the Pulaar language?

The actors really wanted to bring their personal experiences into their performances and this is their first language. I also wanted the story to be told with all the quiet nuances and double-meanings contained in Pulaar. How did we communicate? I spoke in French to those younger cast members that had been to school, but had to rely on a local translator, who did not speak any English, to translate from French to Pulaar for the other cast members. Then I would translate any instructions into English for my American camera crew, who were unable to speak directly to my Senegalese crew. Gestures and smiles saved us.

The movie addresses the human rights issue of forced early marriage. How does the film portray this sensitive and timely topic?

Despite the proven negative outcomes, the practice of early marriage continues to persist. *Tall as the Baobab Tree* addresses this disconnect by exploring the multitude of perspectives on this seemingly black-and-white issue within the framework of a narrative story.



Q&A CONTINUED

In rural Africa where the reality of poverty is at its harshest, it is the time-tested traditions – including early marriage – that are often the villagers’ only sure means of survival. Although the film’s young protagonist clearly supports the path of education rather than marriage, we come to understand that for her parents, the modern world of school is mysterious and uncertain whereas the agrarian world of marriage and farming is stable and proven, generation after generation.

By contrasting these two worldviews, *Tall as the Baobab Tree* poignantly reveals a family’s struggle to find its footing at the edge of the modern world... where questions of right and wrong are not always so black and white.

What do you mean when you say that the film speaks as a voice of the young generation across the developing world?

Nearly 85% of the world’s population lives in developing countries such as the one portrayed in *Tall as the Baobab Tree*. Our film speaks truthfully to what countless families in the developing world are experiencing today: the passion, frustration, and hope of young people who dream of building their futures through education. In this way, *Tall as the Baobab Tree* speaks powerfully as a voice of the young generation in Africa and across the developing world.

Why did you film a fictional narrative instead of handling this as a documentary?

I felt a documentary would be too black and white, and that fiction was a more effective tool for capturing the larger picture.

I wanted to tell a story that captures the emotions of the old and new worlds colliding. I felt a narrative structure could better explore the tensions, quiet victories, and heartbreaks that come with this change.

Q&A CONTINUED

But I didn't just write a script. I worked with the students. For example, I would say – “who would you go to for help?” They would respond, “the teacher” – “well what would the teacher say?” – and so on.

The script reflected the realities of their world. The film blends the divide between fiction and reality. The two main characters are actual sisters in real life. The girl who plays Coumba is indeed the first person in her family ever to go to school and the woman who plays the girls' mother was really married very young.

What do you want audiences to take away from this film?

In *Tall as the Baobab Tree* I really strove to truthfully represent the villagers and their culture, countering the one-dimensional approach taken by many other media representations of rural Africans. Rather than contributing to the “othering” of rural Africans, my hope is that the film will spark positive cross-cultural dialogue and help us embrace our shared humanity.

On my first trip to the village almost 4 years ago, I brought with me all the lingering, uncomfortable feelings of guilt that I'd picked up from the Western media portrayal of “poor Africans.” These feelings dissipated as my relationship with the villagers quickly shifted from one of pity to one of respect—respect for their culture, their optimism, and their work ethic.

The contrast between my expectations and the reality I encountered was profound. *Tall as the Baobab Tree* shares this reality.

What differentiates this film from others in the same genre?

While many contemporary films coming from Africa draw attention to themselves through violence and sensationalism, *Tall as a Baobab Tree* is a peaceful story that seeks to bring people closer together through intimacy and honesty.

My recent experience with young people in Doha, Qatar - one of the fastest growing economies in the world – is far removed from life in rural Africa. But the feelings, the tensions, the quiet victories and the heartbreaks that come with change are universal.

CAST BIOS

Dior and Oumoul Kâ – Coumba and Debo

Dior and Oumoul play the two leading roles of Coumba and Debo, sisters who are the first from their family to attend school. Lifelong residents of the village of Sinthiou Mbadane, Senegal, both girls are currently full-time students. Dior was part of the first class of children to attend the Sinthiou Mbadane primary school, built in 2000—the first school ever accessible to the villagers.

Cheikh Dia – Amady

Also a lifelong resident of Sinthiou Mbadane, Cheikh joined Dior as part of the inaugural class of village students at the local primary school. Like his character in the film, Cheikh dreams of graduating high school and going to college.

Alpha Dia – Silèye

Alpha, also from Sinthiou Mbadane, brings his artistic abilities to the screen for the first time in a breakout performance. Alpha, like his character Silèye, was just a few years too old to attend the newly built primary school in 2000 and has never received a formal education.



Student Academy Award nominated director Jeremy Teicher presenting the documentary film that inspired *Tall The*

Mboural Dia – Mother

Mboural lives next door to Dior and Uumul in Sinthiou Mbadane. A mother of many children, Mboural was married at a young age and has never been to school. Her moving performance in *Tall as the Baobab Tree* speaks to her strong abilities as an improviser.

Mouhamed Diallo – Father

Mouhamed lives just outside Sinthiou Mbadane in the nearby town of M'bour, where the city scenes in were filmed. Mouhamed is of Peuhl origin and was glad to reconnect with his roots during filming in the village.

Birame Ndour – Teacher

Birame is the founder and principal of the Sinthiou Mbadane primary school. Brime's vision and dedication has grown the school from one classroom and under 15 students in 2000 to six classrooms and nearly 200 students today.

Mamel Dia – Village Elder

Mamel is one of Sinthiou Mbadane's leaders who opened his home to our crew and made this film possible. Although he has never been to school himself, Mamel's forward thinking and love of education has seen the village of Sinthiou Mbadane grow and prosper.

The director presenting the documentary film that inspired the movie at a special premier event at American Ambassador's residence in Dakar (2010) to international press coverage.

CREW BIOS

Jeremy Teicher – Director, Co-Producer, Co-writer

Jeremy Teicher is a Student Academy Award-nominated director whose first feature film, TALL AS THE BAOBAB TREE (2012), is garnering acclaim from festivals around the world. Tall as the Baobab Tree won the “Best Feature Narrative” award from the Doha-Giffoni jury at Doha-Tribeca Film Festival and was ranked in the top 20 out of over 170 feature films by audience vote at International Film Festival Rotterdam.

TALL AS THE BAOBAB TREE is inspired by Jeremy's ground breaking documentary short, THIS IS US (2011), which was awarded a prestigious Lombard Public Service Fellowship, supported by Kodak, and earned Jeremy a nomination for a Student Academy Award.

Both films were shot on location in a rural village in Senegal, Africa, with the documentary premiering at the American Embassy in Dakar to international media coverage. Jeremy graduated cum laude from Dartmouth College where he studied Film, English, and Theater.

Chris Collis - Director of Photography, Co-Producer

Specializing in the new wave of HD/SLR technology, Chris is a recognized leader in the Wide Open Camera online community of filmmakers. His work on documentaries, commercials, and music videos includes filming A-list talent such as Johnny Depp, Mickey Rourke, Sharron Stone, and Hugh Hefner and credits on well-known shows such as

Sesame Street. Based out of Los Angeles, he holds a BFA from Emerson College.

Sofi Marshall - Editor

This is the fourth feature film Sofi has edited, including *The Perfect Wedding*, written by EDGAR Award finalist Ed Gaffney and NY Times bestselling author Suzanne Brockmann, and *We're Glad You're Here*, which screened as a part of the NewFilmmakers NY series and received a Silver Lei Award at the Honolulu Film Award. Two short films Sofi worked on premiered at SXSW 2012. She graduated from Boston University's College of Communication in 2009.

Jay Wadley - Composer

Winner of a 2011 Charles Ives Fellowship Award and a 2007 Charles Ives Scholarship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York based composer/producer Jay Wadley holds an MM and AD in Music composition from the Yale School of Music and a BM from Oklahoma City University. His credits include TV shows *Lie To Me*, *Doctor Who* and *The Nine Lives of Chloe King*. He has worked on orchestrations and arrangements with artists such as Mark Ronson, Rufus Wainwright and Calexico.

Salieu Suso, Kora Player

Salieu was trained to play the Kora beginning at age 8 by his father, renowned Kora player Alhaji Musa Makang Suso. He is a descendent of JaliMady Wulayn Suso, the inventor of the Kora.

TECHNICAL DETAILS

Original title: Grand comme le Boabab
English title: Tall as the Boabab Tree
Language: Pulaar
Subtitles: English or French
Running Time: 82 minutes
Format: HDCAM 1.77 [16x9]
Sound: Dolby Stereo
Year of Production: 2012
Country: Senegal / USA

Shot on location in the rural village of Sinthiou Mbadane, Senegal, *Tall as the Boabab Tree* uses the latest HD/SLR Technology with a Canon 5D and 7D and sound recorded using a Zoom recorder. Partnering with Wide Open Camera, our gear sponsors include Canon, Zeiss, Birns & Sawyer, Kessler, Marshall, Ikan, Switronix, Zacuto, and Jag35.

The results are stunning, displaying a natural style that elegantly shows off the beauty of rural Senegal and organically captures the natural, improvised performances of our local cast.

CONTACT

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