



INTO THE COLD
 'The Nine Muses' mixes archive material about the black-British experience, opposite, with contemporary footage shot in Alaska, above

A densely woven film tapestry linking the black-British experience to 'The Odyssey', 'The Nine Muses' marks a spellbinding return to the cinema screen for 'Handsworth Songs' director John Akomfrah. He talks to **Kieron Corless**

First, a bit of backstory. The Black Audio Film Collective formed in 1982, comprising seven members. Throughout the 1980s and 90s they carved a space for themselves as arguably Britain's foremost visual and sonic innovators, in a range of documentary, gallery-based, video and essayistic modes exploring the Black-British experience in all its myriad formations. (Chris Marker is the most prominent of their legion of admirers.) *Handsworth Songs* (1986), an essay film made for and transmitted by Channel 4, is generally held to be their masterpiece, a political and poetically allusive exploration of the historical roots of Britain's post-imperial malaise, whose most visible manifesta-

tion was the wave of riots in 1980s Britain.

The collective disbanded in 1998. A few former members ultimately formed a smaller unit, the production company Smoking Dogs Films, and one of them, John Akomfrah, assumed the mantle of director. A range of acclaimed feature films, TV documentaries, gallery pieces and music promos followed. At the same time, the reputation of the BAFC continued to grow apace, fuelled in part by a touring retrospective in 2007 and a superb monograph, *The Ghosts of Songs*, produced the same year by FACT in Liverpool under the editorship of the Otolith Group's Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun.

Back to the present. The latest film by John Akomfrah, *The Nine Muses*, started life as a gallery film piece called *Mnemosyne*, which revisited

broadly the same area where *Handsworth Songs* was filmed, in a further act of haunting archival reclamation and historical recuperation. The gallery piece was then expanded, with completion money from the former UKFC, and renamed *The Nine Muses* – a layered, immersive, lyrical, densely woven feature-film tapestry that mixes fragments of archive with Greek myth, poetry, music, brooding ambient sounds and contemporary footage shot in Alaska and Liverpool.

As that description suggests, it's phenomenally rich and multifaceted: a profoundly moving lament and 'ghost song', a fractured dialogue between past and present, a complex sounding of the exilic imaginary. Easily one of the best of the much-vaunted recent crop of British films, it shows that Akomfrah and his collaborators are still right at the top of their game.

Kieron Corless: What was the impulse that drove you to make 'The Nine Muses'?

John Akomfrah: I felt there was unfinished business with *Handsworth Songs* that required us to go back into the archive. When we were in Birmingham for that film in the mid-80s, we came across all this stuff, but it didn't quite fit with what we were trying to do. For instance there was a guy in a film from 1964 – he's now in *The Nine Muses* – and he's clearly been asked what he thinks about race relations in this country. He says, "I love you, but the majority of you don't love we. We came here with pure heart for you."

It's always haunted me, that clip. Mainly because by the time I started making films with the BAFC, I don't think any of us would have spoken in that lover's discourse about this country – we were in a different phase of the cultural evolution of people of colour in the UK; we'd already moved to a place of disenchantment. So I always wanted to do something with this guy, and others. So the brief I put in to the Arts Council was that I needed to go back to Birmingham and look at the archive again from '48 to the 70s. And that's pretty much what we did. It took about six months and I must have watched I don't know how many thousands of hours.

KC: How would you characterise the imagery you were turning up in the archives?

JA: Most of it's through a social-problem prism. So the images of the migrants coming off the boat would usually be framed by, "Why the fuck are they coming? There are too many of them." So part of the job, really, was to see if we could help these images migrate from that world into another one where they start to speak for themselves. The question of migration is really critical. When you watch this stuff you can see all these multiple possibilities, and you can also see why the choices have been made to fix those images in the way they have been.

KC: So it's to some extent a process of releasing latent or hidden meanings in the images?

JA: It's one of the things I'm obsessed about with archives, because on the one hand they are repositories of official memory, but they're also phantoms of other kinds of memories that weren't taken up. A classic example for me is a piece with Alan Whicker, which is again in a film from 1959. There's a shipload of guys dressed to the nines in the bar, and the voiceover is along the lines of, "Look at these innocents." In the middle of it – you can read his lips – one says to the guy next him, "Look 'pon 'im" – ie "Look at that fucking idiot." ➡

That's it in a nutshell. He's insulting the BBC, but they never saw it – they didn't even realise this was possible. You can see they just thought, "Oh, there's a bunch of colonial migrants. We shoot and we go." In a microcosm that's what I love about the archive, and that's what holds you prisoner all the time – you're hoping there'll be those moments, explicitly acknowledging its Janus-faced nature.

KC: 'The Nine Muses' also has contemporary footage you've shot with solitary figures in different coloured coats in snowbound Alaskan landscapes. Why did you decide to include that?

JA: When we initially started to assemble the material, it just felt to me like it needed another layer, a counterpoint to the archive material – instinctively we thought we've got to speak from another place. The archive is tricky – it's opaque, all kinds of things are going on. How do you suggest that unless you place something else next to it? You can't.

It just so happened that we were going to try and do something with T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land'. I'd been fascinated by that poem for a while, but literally as we were embarking on it I thought, "Actually, it's the same project as *The Nine Muses*." Because the images we were trying to devise to speak about *The Waste Land* almost suggested in embryo the migrant experience. Normally when you meet people of my mother's generation, they pretty much say the same thing, either coded or overt – they will tell you when they came, where from, and that it was really, really cold. And the experience of coming over is usually described by them in solitary terms: "I came on a boat, and I was alone." They will also talk about how when they came to austerity Britain, they felt out of place, not colour-wise but in dress – it was grey, and there was me in my yellow suit.

KC: Could you talk about the myth of Mnemosyne (the title of your earlier gallery project) and this key framing device of 'The Nine Muses'?

JA: I knew we wanted something that suggested thematic chapters, and at the time I was reading Robert Graves's book on the Greek myths. It was a shocking realisation for me that the nine muses were all seen to be from this one figure, Mnemosyne, that gave birth to the arts. What that says in effect is that memory really is the fount of all the creative arts. The Greeks knew this 2000 years ago – I didn't.

I guess everyone who makes stuff works on that basis, but I didn't realise that there was this codified set of ideas linking memory and creative practice. It had to go in the film, because that's what it is – you're watching people and communities create themselves. So these creative acts of becoming could be broken up into chapters that somehow suggested they have some relationship to art or to classically understood art – the epic, the tragic, the song, etc. Once I'd got that, everything sort of fell into place.

KC: Then there's this other dimension in the film: the readings from canonical texts, the most central of which is 'The Odyssey'?

JA: It still felt like the film needed some kind of narrative strand or spine that suggested linearity, however fractured, and 'The Odyssey' offers that – but a particular reading of it. Because the other thing you hear when you speak to the older gener-



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ation, they say – sometimes jokingly, sometimes not – "We thought we were coming to the mother country." At the time, up until the late 60s, most people were formally not just theoretically British – they were part of British territory. So they weren't coming to a foreign country, they were moving from the periphery to the centre.

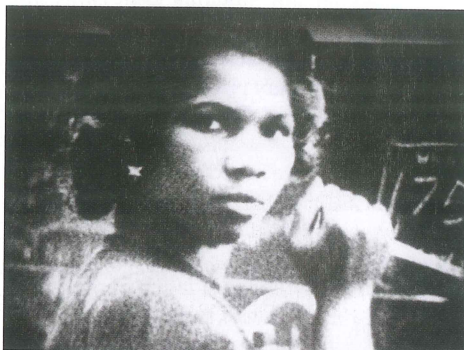
This is kind of the story of Telemachus, protagonist of 'The Odyssey' – it's how 'The Odyssey' starts. Telemachus goes in search of his father, and through that device you learn something about that territory – the ancient world, as it were – and the nature of valour. In other words, the journey of Telemachus suggests the hyphen, how all hyphens come to be – how you go from one thing to a mix of things, you come from the colonies and you become black-British. It's a journey of the hyphen.

KC: The sound design of the film is incredibly complex and layered. At what point in the process do you start working with your sound designer Trevor Mathison?

JA: Literally with every piece of footage I would start a dialogue with Trevor pretty early. He's an extraordinary creative partner. He tends to work to fill the lower register of the sound palette, rumbly and low, and as I listen to it I start to think of other material that might fill the top register of the sonic range. First and foremost what Trevor provides is the noise of the thing. I'm not really into music, but

OUT OF THE ARCHIVE

'Handsworth Songs', below, established the reputation of John Akomfrah, top, and the Black Audio Film Collective in the 1980s



I'm into noise in a big way, and everything that's in the piece is there because of its noise value – with the exception of two Arvo Pärt pieces that work pretty much as standard scores. Every piece of sound in the film is to suggest an interior to the images. That's first and foremost what I'm interested in. Trevor comes with a package – you have me and you have noise, what I call a kind of "fuck-off ambience". It says, "I'm in your face and I take no prisoners."

KC: You've talked often of your interest in improvisatory musical forms, especially Indian music and jazz, but how does that inflect how you make films?

JA: *The Nine Muses* may suggest a plan, but that plan was only there in outline, and then the process is one of arriving at the structure, finding the form of the piece. That in a nutshell is the improvisatory logic in music that I'm trying to formulate as a practice for the cinema we do. It's not something you move away from to arrive at something – it's the basis of the practice. Because if you're talking about marrying together all these disparate elements – be they archival, stuff shot, musics, composed pieces, ambient tracks, readings, fiction, non-fiction, this range – then the point is to be able to say to yourself, "Relax, let's just play with this stuff" – and I mean in the form as well as the emotions. Let's just see what they start to suggest to each other – it's that open-ended and that free.

KC: So we're back to 'becoming'. In that sense, the form mirrors the subject-matter, to an extent?

JA: There's nothing any of the constituent parts suggest that I didn't know in advance, but what I can't know until we try to make them work is what they might suggest in relation to each other. There's something almost perverse in the process. I'm fascinated by some of these collisions, like taking these Arvo Pärt liturgical pieces – which are all about transcendence and attempting to connect with something otherworldly – to try and speak about the most prosaic and banal of human truths, like "How do I find a fucking job?" That appeals to me. So there are these humorous and slightly perverse sides to it.

KC: It seems to me that 'The Nine Muses' is your most affective – and most beautiful – film to date.

JA: Without question. There are two films I've made that are beautiful – this one and *Testament* [1988] – because of their investment in the affective. I wanted to suggest with this piece the affective journey of the African diaspora in Britain, and get to a place where people might start to understand some of the emotional underpinnings of that journey. I've made lots of stuff about the political and cultural resonances of migration and exile and settlement, but this is the one that most felt like it needed to be from the heart, quite literally. I can't watch it without occasionally shedding a tear. But it's not literally what I set out to do. It's not an intended effect.

KC: That in itself is interesting in light of what you said about improvisation.

JA: You commit to a process of improvisation and you arrive where you arrive. This is what the journey seemed to suggest, and I would have been dishonest if I'd tried to engineer it otherwise.

■ *The Nine Muses* is released on 20 January, and is reviewed on page 75