

# The Nine Muses

A Film by John Akomfrah



Orizzonti, Venice Film Festival 2010  
New Frontier, Sundance Film Festival 2011  
London Film Festival 2010

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## SYNOPSIS

Twenty-five years after the end of the Trojan War, Odysseus still has not returned home. So his son, Telemachus, sets off an epic journey in search of his lost father.



So begins Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey* - the most revered of ancient epic poems and narrative reference point for John Akomfrah's unusual and genre defying story about chance, fate and redemption.

Structured as an allegorical fable and loosely inspired by existential science fiction, ***The Nine Muses*** is a stylized, unusual and idiosyncratic retelling of the history of mass migration to post war Britain through the suggestive lens of the Homeric epic.

Divided into nine overlapping musical chapters and mixing a vast array of archival material with shot scenes from the United States and the United Kingdom, *The Nine Muses* is a modern recasting of Homer's epic as a 'song cycle' on journeys, on migration, on memory and the power of elegy.

Devised and scripted from the writings of an array of authors including Dante Alighieri, Samuel Beckett, Emily Dickinson, James Joyce, John Milton, Friedrich Nietzsche, William Shakespeare, Sophocles and Dylan Thomas, *The Nine Muses* is a set of imaginary journeys through myth, folklore, history and a museum of intangible things .

Set between 1949 and 1970 and seamlessly weaving multiple 'sayings' from an equally diverse range of writers including Matsuo Basho, TS Eliot, Li Po and Rabindranath Tagore, *The Nine Muses* unfolds as a coherent and utterly absorbing meditation on a journey towards self-discovery, a 'sorrow song' on a quest for knowledge and identity .



## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I am obsessed with archival material: those ghostly traces of lived moments, those pariah images and sounds that now occupy a unique space somewhere between history and myth.

But I also know that this obsessive attachment to these phantom narratives of our shared past are the end rather than the beginning of such projects. Because what always comes first for me in the long and convoluted evolution of such mixed genre projects are the questions.

And for *The Nine Muses*, the questions to myself went something like this:

How does one begin to say something new about a story everyone claims to know? And in that process how does one fulfill what historian Carlo Ginzburg once called “our obligation to the dead” without sacrificing our equally pressing debt to the living? Finally what aesthetic and ethical considerations should govern how one constructs a “historical fiction” about events and lives that have been profoundly shaped by what the St Lucian poet Derek Walcott called, “the absence of ruins”? Lives without monuments, without the ‘official’ signature of recognition and interest.

This film is my Proustian attempt to suggest what some of those “ruins” might look like, a desire to look into that dark mirror of one’s own past in search of images, ideas, writers and music’s with which to construct such a monument.

The bricks came, as usual, from a variety of sources. In music, the work of Estonian composer Arvo Pärt felt appropriate once again. As indeed did the work of the Gundecha Brothers, the supreme exponents of India’s oldest musical form, the Dhrupad.

All manner of writers from Beckett to Shakespeare, from Dante to TS Eliot also made an appearance and ended up being worked into the script. Sometimes it was just image the writing invoked; for instance, I’ve never forgotten the remarkable opening of James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when he talked about the physical sensation of a child peeing in his bed. Sometimes it was the mood: I read John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* at school but its mood has always stayed with me.

For images, I wanted to rely on my own idiosyncratic sense of the ‘memorable’ because it was the only way pre-selecting from the thousands of feet of film stored in England alone! For instance, there is a sequence from a film made in 1964 that has haunted me since I saw it almost twenty years ago. It is of a young Jamaican man who spoke movingly and eloquently about how migrating to England was for him a journey of love. I have always wanted to use it in something.

In the end, how such 'hybrid' films start at all is one of those mysteries, even to me. Do you shoot original material first or do you first assemble the historical artifacts. I don't know. But there are always clues, hints and influences. And I suppose the most important one this time is the grandfather of all epics, Homer's *Odyssey*.

There is something very modern about *The Odyssey* that made it very relevant for me in the developing of my contemporary epic about migration: something about its fractured narrative, its multiple story lines, its spatial and temporal disjunctions and complexities made it the perfect foil. So from very early on, that ancient epic poem suggested itself as the starting point for my stories about journeys from the margins to the centre, from the colony to the metropolis.

I am also obsessed with the formal properties of the Greek myths themselves, especially some of its more 'underdeveloped' tales and characters. Its tangents and apparent aberrations especially fascinate me: characters who appear and disappear without explanation, stories that start in the middle and seemingly go nowhere. And the desire to use this approach as well as some of the figures and stories from this vast and remarkable constellation of incomplete tales was the guiding force behind *The Nine Muses*.

John Akomfrah



# Soul on Ice - John Akomfrah's making of The Nine Muses

## Why Alaska?

About ten years ago I was really fascinated about the idea of going out and filming in a really remote and inhospitable winter environment. I was not quite sure what the filming would amount to when done, but I was really obsessed by trying to make a barren wintery landscape speak more than just its elemental specifics.

This longing to film in this kind of environment also had to do with a second, more prosaic reason. When we (and I mean my long term collaborators Lina Gopaul and David Lawson) were all younger, we had collectively asked our parents "what was it like when you first arrived in Britain", and our parents had all said without fail, that the UK was the coldest place that they had ever been too or would ever want to go to! That may sound a impossible now, but remember in the 1940's and 1950's this was a place without the central heating systems that we are used to now, a country kept warm by paraffin heaters and coal fires! So it was damned cold!

The third corner of the idea that brought the film together was, I suppose, my love for the book. Throughout my entire life I have read a lot of poetry, from Shakespeare to Basho and one of the long term projects that I have dreamed of is to try and make a film on T.S Eliot's The Waste Land. For years, I mused over how could I do this. And then one day it came to me. It could be done by re-imagining the poem as a black journey through a frozen landscape. This was to become my Holy Grail, to find the place and the opportunity to get to a winter wilderness to film something for this poem. But how and when was the question!

Then the chance showed itself. I was commissioned by the BBC to make a film on the tragedy that was the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill. This was it!

Four of us set off on this 10,000 mile journey, flying, driving and sailing through the winter wilderness of South East Alaska. Here I was, leading this trip, dressed in umpteenth layers of arctic snow gear, thermals and a large 4x4 with snow tyres. It became an African expedition; three of us were African; the producer was Togolese, the cameraman was South African and there was one honorary African (the sound recordist is Jamaican). Fantastic.

We filmed on two separate trips for about a month in total. I filmed the Exxon Valdez film and then went back a second time for "The Wasteland". I have to say they were two of the toughest periods of filming I have ever undertaken. The challenges we faced everyday were extreme, especially working with a digital camera that had never been tested in these conditions. The temperatures would fall every night to around a steady minus 30 centigrade and we would have only 5 hours of day light a day (9.30am - 2.30pm). Each morning we would come out of a new motel and there would be another foot of snow that we would have to clear from the car to get it out to drive in the pitch black. Because we had so little time to get to a every location, we would have to drive in one direction only, there were no street lights and it would be absolutely fatal to try and drive back at night on the black ice through mountain passes and gorges.

Intellectually, in my head this became an expedition about putting a black presence in all of the "whiteness" of the landscape. And in this stillness, in the absolute silence of the snow, ice and mountains, a number of ideas coalesced that made me think that a project on poetry and memory should be broader than just "The Wasteland". That "The Wasteland" poem should be the catalyst for a project on memory, Britain and migration. That it should touch on not only my parents generation, but the universal journeys of all of those who have made those journeys across oceans in search of a better life over the years.

And so Alaska became my "Paradise Lost", a paradise of lost memory.

### **Why the Classics?**

The film is about the journey that my parents generation made in coming to the UK and when they were in the Caribbean, Africa, Asia these were all of the texts that they would have read, these were part of the elements that made you English; Shakespeare, Milton, Beckett etc. And I was excited to place some of these texts within such a cold environment, to see if they could work allegorically. Which they do fantastically well.

### **Is this part of an African Renaissance in British Art?**

Maybe, maybe not. It is great that there are a number of artists of African heritage doing well at the moment, they include Chris Ofili, Yinka Shonibare (The Ship in Trafalgar Square), Oswald Boateng, Duro Olowu in Fashion and David Adjaye in architecture, who all working at the top of their game. There needs to be a few more women coming through especially in film.



## John Akomfrah



The child of radical political activists who was born in Accra (Ghana) in 1957, John Akomfrah is one of the influential figures of the 1980s black British cultural scene. As an artist, lecturer, writer, critic and film director, his twenty-year body of work is considered among the most distinctive and innovative to be produced in contemporary Britain.

A musician, photographer, Super 8 filmmaker and enthusiast in his teenage years, Akomfrah was also a founder member of various cine-clubs in London throughout the late seventies and early eighties. And through these organizations helped to champion a wide range of cinemas including Asian and European art house, the militant cinemas of Africa and Latin America as well as American independent and avant-garde cinemas to minority audiences.

A disciple of punk's DIY aesthetic, Akomfrah in 1982 helped found the **Black Audio Film Collective**, the seminal, cine- cultural workshop and directed a broad range of work within this critically acclaimed outfit - fiction films, tape slides, single screen gallery pieces, experimental videos, creative documentaries and music videos. Lyrical, poetic and essayistic, his work has always traversed the worlds of fiction and non-fiction, cinema and television, the art gallery and the film festival.

His 1986 film essay, ***Handsworth Songs*** – a film that explored the racial disturbances that had broken out across cities in Britain in 1985 - brought Akomfrah to the international circuit. And the film won seven international prizes including the prestigious John Grierson Award For Documentary (UK) in 1987.



His début feature film, **Testament** was a moving story on African political exile that premiered at Cannes, (Semaine De La Critique) in 1989. And **Testament** also went on to win a number of international prizes.

Since 1987 Akomfrah's work has also been shown in a variety of galleries across the world. These include two shows at the *Documenta* (Germany) as well as shows at the De Balie (Holland); Centre George Pompidou (France); the BFI Southbank, Serpentine and Whitechapel Galleries (United Kingdom); Museum of Modern Art and The Walker Arts Centre (United States).

A major retrospective of Akomfrah's gallery based work along with the Black Audio Film Collective has just finished at the STUK art gallery in Leuven, Belgium after initially premiering in England (at the FACT and Arnolfini galleries). The work is set to tour the rest of Europe this year.

Established as one of the pioneers of digital cinema in the United Kingdom Akomfrah was awarded the prestigious Gold Digital Award at the Cheonju International Film Festival (South Korea) in 2000 for "the most impressive use of digital technology".

From 2001 to 2007, John Akomfrah was a Governor of the British Film Institute. And he is currently a Governor of film organization, Film London. He is Visiting Professor in Film at the University Of Westminster (United Kingdom).

John has lectured throughout the world in a range of institutions, including the California Institute of Arts; the Art Institute of Chicago; the Tisch School of the Arts, New York; and The London Institute. He has just finished an artists residency at NYU in New York (May 2011).

JOHN AKOMFRAH was recently AWARDED the PRESTIGIOUS EUROPEAN CULTURAL FOUNDATION LAUREATE prize in Nov 2011

## Filmography

### – FEATURE FILMS –

2010	The Nine Muses
1998	Speak Like a Child
1991	Who Needs a Heart
1988	Testament

### – ART GALLERY FILMS –

2010	Mnemosyne
2008	The Genome Chronicles

– DOCUMENTARIES –

2009	Oil Spill - The Exxon Valdez Disaster
2004	Urban Soul: The Making of Modern R&B
2003	Stan Tracey: The Godfather of British Jazz
2003	Mariah Carey: The Billion Dollar Babe
2001	Prostitutes
2000	A Death in the Family
2000	Stalkers
1999	Riot
1999	The Wonderful World of Louis Armstrong
1998	Goldie – When Saturn returns
1997	Martin Luther King - Days of Hope
1996	The Cheese and The Worm
1995	The Last Angel of History
1995	African Political Broadcasts
1995	African Footsteps
1994	Beaton But Unbowed
1994	Lush Life
1993	Seven Songs for Malcolm X
1991	A Touch of the Tar Brush
1986	Handsworth Songs

– SHORT FILMS –

2001	Digitopia (33 mins)
1998	The Call of Mist (11 mins)
1997	Memory Room 451 (20 mins)
1995	The Mothership Connection (25 mins)

– POP PROMOS –

1998	WALKING - LAURYN HILL (8 mins)
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## Credits

Director  
Producers

Editors

Director of Photography  
Sound Recordist  
Composer  
Dubbing Mixer  
Production Manager  
Archivist  
UK Film Council Executives

Made in England Executives

Arts Council of England  
BBC  
Production

In association with

A Made in England Initiative  
A Smoking Dogs Films Production

### **Voices**

Sean Barrett, John Barrymore  
Richard Burton, Dermot Crowley  
Teresa Gallagher, Alex Jennings  
Anton Lesser, Jim Norton  
Michael Sheen, Heathcote Williams

### **Cast**

Yellow Coats  
Blue Coat  
Black Coats

John Akomfrah  
Lina Gopaul  
David Lawson  
Mikka Leskinen  
Ben Hunt  
Dewald Aukema  
Trevor Mathison  
Trevor Mathison  
Robin Fellows  
Lucia Ashmore  
John Akomfrah  
Tanya Seghatchian  
Lizzie Francke  
Chris Dorley Brown  
Paul Gerhardt  
Paul Marshall  
Tim Burke  
UK Film Council  
The Arts Council of England  
Soul Rebel Pictures  
Creation Rebel Films  
BBC English Regions  
Naxos Audio Books

Trevor Mathison, John Akomfrah  
David Lawson  
David Lawson, Trevor Mathison

### **Readings (By Kind Permission of Naxos Audio)**

Paradise Lost  
The Odyssey  
Richard II  
The Divine Comedy  
The Unnamable  
Under Milk Wood  
Thus Spoke Zarathustra  
The Song of Solomon  
Twelfth Night  
Molloy  
Oedipus  
Come Slowly Eden  
Eden Is That Old Fashioned House  
A Portrait Of The Artist As A Young Man  
Finnegans Wake

John Milton  
Homer  
William Shakespeare  
Dante Alighieri  
Samuel Beckett  
Dylan Thomas  
Friedrich Nietzsche  
The Old Testament  
William Shakespeare  
Samuel Beckett  
Sophocles  
Emily Dickinson  
Emily Dickinson  
James Joyce  
James Joyce

### **Performers**

Motherless Child  
Let My People Go  
Raag Gaoti ( Aalaap)  
Ballad Of Finnegans Wake

Leontyne Price  
Paul Robeson  
The Gundecha Brothers  
Jim Norton

### **Quotes**

The Journey Itself Is Home  
Our journey had advanced  
A cold coming we had of it  
For whatever we lose  
Hard Is The Journey  
Art Thou Abroad On This Stormy Night  
He journeyed beyond the distant  
How Heavy Do I Journey On The Way  
Nobody has ever measured, not even poets

Matsuo Basho  
Emily Dickinson  
TS Eliot  
EE Cummings  
Li Po  
Rabindranath Tagore  
Epic of Gilgamesh  
William Shakespeare  
Zelda Fitzgerald

Archive Sources  
BBC Information and Archives  
Birmingham Central Library  
Media Archive for Central England  
Naxos Audio Books

## **Films**

"The Colony" (1964)	Dir: Philip Donnellan
"A Man from the Sun" (1956 )	
"Stranger in Town" (1969)	Dir: Philip Donnellan
"Home for Heroes"(1964)	Dir. Richard Marquand
"Monitor"(1960)	
"Born Black Born British" (1972)"	
24 Hours" (1968)	
"Tonight"(1963)	

## **Music**

Sables	Solitudes	Tamia and Pierre Favre
Clair Obsur	Solitudes	Tamia and Pierre Favre
Der Leiermann	Winterreise	Franz Schubert
No Place Nowhere	Cello	David Darling
Raag Gaoti ( Aalaap)	Dhrupad	The Gundecha Brothers
Solitudes	Solitudes	Tamia and Pierre Favre
Vorspiel	Parsifal	Richard Wagner
Spiegel im Spiegel	Alina	Arvo Pärt
Far Enough	If You Look Far Enough	Arild Andersen
Gul Huyi Jaati Hain	Faiz by Abida	Abida Parveen
In Exile	The Silver Tree	Lisa Gerrard
Adagio in B minor K540		Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Care Selve	Atalanta	George Frideric Handel
VIII	Das Buch der Klänge	Hans Otte
In Motion	Dark Wood	David Darling
Sadir	Barzakh	Anouar Brahem
Silouans Song	Te Deum	Arvo Pärt
Pari Intervallo	Arbos	Arvo Pärt
Lascia ch'io Pianga	Rinaldo	George Frideric Handel
Elegy	Immortal Memory	Lisa Gerrard & Patrick Cassidy
Post Dub Symphonies I – X		Trevor Mathison

A Smoking Dogs Films Production made in association with  
BBC English Regions, Naxos Audio Books,  
Creation Films and Soul Rebel Pictures.

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