

Lumumba: An African leader's brief blaze of glory

Patrice Lumumba (played by Eriq Ebouaney) was for a very short period of time, until his assassination, the first prime minister of an independent Congo. *Lumumba* starts in 1960 but then jumps back a few years to the beginning of Lumumba's political career. The wholesale change he helped bring about, the insurrections that forced the hand of Belgium's King Leopold II, who then ruled Congo, went beyond anything he might have dreamed and feared.

The film refuses to lay out Lumumba's life in traditional, corny terms by presenting a lengthy and unwieldy history lesson and then groveling for audience sympathy. Instead *Lumumba* vaults through his radicalisation and the track that led this former civil servant and beer salesman to leave his angry stamp on the world. Lumumba's compulsiveness is pivotal during the handing over of Congo from Belgium to its freshly elected black officials. The new president, Joseph Kasa Vubu (Maka Kotto), is an alleviator; he gently thanks Belgium, taking his lead from paternalistic comments like, 'Beware of hasty reforms, and do not replace Belgian institutions unless you are sure you can do better.' When Lumumba hears this, he is unable to contain the wolfish snarl on his face. 'Our wounds are too fresh and painful for us to erase them from our memory,' he brays.

Certainly Lumumba's wounds are fresh. He incurred them when he was arrested

Elvis Mitchell of the New York Times reviews this movie which opened in South Africa recently.

for subversion and spent six months in jail before he was freed to attend a political summit in Brussels. Lumumba is a man who remembers indignity and wants to ensure that others will never have to suffer.

It's a thrill to see a movie about African politics that does not condescend to audiences by placing a sympathetic white African at the centre. The film's director was out to make a film that exposes the ugliness of cold war politics and knee-jerk imperialism. The movie's view is that Lumumba was sacrificed to stop African independence. His enemies used the hollow, well-meaning guise of stamping out the Communist threat. And *Lumumba* lets neither the United States nor the United Nations off the hook: it implicates both in his assassination. The irony is that Congo remains embroiled in overthrow and turmoil, the bleakest Pandora's box ever to be pried open. This is a movie about chaos and regret, focusing on the unleashing of forces greater than any one person could hope to handle and the carnage, however necessary, left in their wake.

This is an edited version of the review, supplied by the Film Resource Unit (FRU).
