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I Dreamed of Africa. Hugh Hudson, director.

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'Africa' is anything but picture-perfect

Movies as different as Out of Africa and countless Tarzan epics demonstrate the perennial appeal that Africa holds for Western filmmakers. <p> If you're going to tell a story with an African setting, though, it's best if you have meaningful ideas that help audiences understand the continent's multifaceted nature in new and useful ways. <p> I Dreamed of Africa fails this test by using the landscapes and inhabitants of Kenya not as subjects of intrinsic interest, but merely as picturesque backdrops for the sort of photogenic white characters that Hollywood almost always turns its attention to. <p> Based on real events, the story centers on Kuki Gallmann, a European woman who moves from Venice to Kenya with her husband and young son, faces more harrowing challenges than she ever expected, and ultimately decides to spend the rest of her life there despite the daunting experiences it has heaped upon her. <p> This is promising material, but the filmmakers focus so exclusively on their attractive heroine, played by Kim Basinger (see interview, page 19) with more commitment than credibility, that the story loses any real connection with Africa beyond its value as a beautiful background and a source of jolting plot twists. <p> Among many other questions, alert viewers may ask why so few black faces are visible in a region populated mainly by black people–and why they're shoved into the margins of the screen when they do appear, the better to enhance the picture-perfect features of Basinger and company. <p> Movie-goers looking for exotic scenery and a good cry may find the picture enjoyable. <p> Others should wait for an African excursion that lives up to its title.

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