

Afronauts

Imagine launching yourself into space in a homemade rocket, patched together with pieces of tin. Achieving great feats with nothing but scraps, fumes and pure gumption.

Nuotama Bodomo's "Afronauts" breathes cinematic life into one such fantasy. While the United States and the Soviet Union were engaged in the space race in the 1960s, a Zambian activist, Edward Mukuka Nkoloso, gathered a dozen teenagers to try to beat the superpowers to the moon. Bodomo takes the true story of the Zambian Space Program and passes it through the looking glass, creating a strange film that's more fever dream than narrative.

"Afronauts" begins with the training regimen of a 17-year-old astronaut, Matha. In a barren desert that looks a lot like the lunar surface, her work is improvised using everyday objects, as if in a child's game, but executed with somber gravity. In buoyancy training Matha is tossed up and down on a sheet of plastic. For weightlessness, she's rolled down a hill in a trash can. Archival audio from Apollo 11 is overlaid on these scenes, lending an ironic seriousness to them. These routines seem absurd, but they're based in reality. Bodomo was inspired by a British newsreel of Nkoloso and his recruits engaged in similar exercises. But while the British reporter surveys them with an air of condescension, Bodomo invests their efforts with genuine pathos, underlining their political motivations.

In 1969, Zambia had recently achieved independence from colonial rule and was struggling to build a self-sufficient economy. The imperialist impulses of space travel don't elude the characters of "Afronauts" – they're Afrofuturists who dream of a radical new existence, free of the oppressions of the past. "Tell them we're all coming," Nkoloso says to Matha before her flight. "Do not impose Christianity on them, Matha. Do not impose the nation-states on them."

"Afronauts" ends inconclusively, on the brink of possibility. The greatest leap man can make, the film seems to suggest, is to imagine a better way of life.