

**FILM REVIEW: THE HERO (*O HEROI*) (ANGOLA)**

Heather Franzese<sup>1</sup>

*Release: 2004*

*In Portuguese with English subtitles*

*Winner, Grand Prize, World Dramatic Competition, 2005 Sundance Film Festival*

---

“You’re a hero but I need normal men,” says the hiring manager at the construction site. Vitorio fought for 20 years in the Angolan civil war, had a leg blown off by a land mine, and now joins 120,000 unemployed Angolan soldiers looking for work and trying to stitch their country back together.

The Hero, applying Italian neo-realism to post-war Angola, thaws an otherwise depressing legacy of war into optimism infused with the warmth of courageous personal relationships. Vitorio, despite being homeless and unemployed, pins his war medal to his t-shirt, puts on his prosthetic leg, and hobbles bravely to the local bar where he falls into an unlikely



friendship with a prostitute named Judite who was separated from her son during the war. Across town, a grandmother struggles under the weight of a water jug and other domestic tasks but performs them lovingly as the caretaker of her grandson Manu after his father disappeared in the war. With or without blood relations, the characters seem to understand implicitly their interdependence and the need for solidarity in rebuilding their lives.

---

<sup>1</sup> Heather Franzese is a Candidate for Master in Public Policy (2007) at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Her work experience includes grassroots development in Mali and fundraising for TransFair USA, the certifier of Fair Trade products.

Women drive ambitious visions for change in this film. Judite, the prostitute, dares to speak her dream of becoming a seamstress and opening a shop. Joana, a young middle-class school teacher, makes clever use of the radio airwaves and personal connections to a political figure to broadcast Vitorio's story to thousands and to mobilize empathy for veterans, spreading hope like a virus through the city of Luanda.

Children who have seen nothing but war during their short lives, on the other hand, glorify the fighting and offer a dismal picture of Angola's future. How will these victims of interrupted childhoods become tomorrow's leaders? If 12-year-old Manu is any indication, the country's youth engage in petty street crime, are unmotivated to study, and see no intrinsic value in work. Manu stares up at the moon and hopes every day for the return of his father, but looking backward into the past does little to prepare for tomorrow.

Winner of the World Dramatic Grand Prize at the 2005 Sundance Film Festival, *The Hero* picks up a tradition of Angolan cinema that began in the 1970s as a vehicle to fight for independence from the Portuguese. In a country where low literacy rates mean that people read on screen, director Zézé Gamboa uses cinema as a tool for social development. Starting with *The Hero's* triumph, the future of film in Angola has a solid foundation to build from.

*The Hero* is a universal story. Neighboring countries may not share the same histories or protagonists, but every country has families and neighbors. The power of social capital, according to *The Hero*, gives political solutions and economic policies a run for their money. For micro-level interactions to spur real reform, each individual must find his or her contribution: the waitress, the child, the expat, the politician, and the pawn shop proprietor. If each takes a step, there is hope that Vitorio, with his prosthetic leg, and Angola, with its spirited people, will learn to walk again.