Siri Ya Mtungi

PRESS KIT
When a big family faces tough challenges, some fall apart and some triumph over what life throws at them.

Siri ya Mtungi’s cast of colourful characters, related by blood or marriage, or simply by love, make up a community that is inspired by love, brought down by fear, superstition and betrayal, lifted by comedy and joy, and strengthened by the intimate bonds of family and friendship.

It’s a story of relationships won and lost.

Between busy Dar es Salaam and the laconic streets of Bagamoyo, we get behind closed doors into the lives of Cheche and his wife Cheusi, daughter of well-known community leader, and polygamist, Mzee Kizito, as well as characters like deejay Duma, amorous Lulu, viperous Farida, lecherous Masharubu, and many more.

When Cheche is gifted a commercial studio by the late photography guru, Habibu, he finds himself not only taking pictures but becoming the focus of what other people want from life. Cheche’s relationships get complicated.

In his unique portraits of individuals, of families and friends, Cheche captures the soul of a community on its journey of hopes, dreams and personal crises.

He is also something of a lady killer, first of all getting entangled in a love triangle with his teenage sweetheart, Tula, and ultimately developing an insatiable appetite for many more lovely ladies who catch his photographer’s eye.

As he battles to keep a balance between work and home, the world around him changes at a furious speed.

Duma, a playa, has problems too – his beautiful girlfriend, Nusura, objects to his hedonistic lifestyle and criminal associations. And when Duma runs into trouble with her father, the slumlord Masharubu, hell explodes.

To the untrained observer, Mzee Kizito has a perfect life. He runs a successful motor garage and keeps his two surviving wives and 17 children in peace and harmony. But few know the trouble he’s about to get when he adds a third wife into the mix.

In the web of sexual relationships, twisted loyalties and cruel antagonisms, the lives of this family spin out of control.

Who will bring harmony again? Who will have the presence of mind to bring back the peace and prosperity they all desire? Which of them has the strength of character to reconcile their conflicts and restore trust?

The first season of Siri ya Mtungi, over 13 episodes, threatens to reveal a nest of secrets. All that matters now is how well they handle them.
CHARACTER SKETCHES

Cheche Mtungi
Cheche the photographer is the ruler of his world. In his photographic studio, Mtungi Studios, he brings together a community in pictures – families, friends, loners and loved ones face him through the lens. Their eyes say something of their lives, their souls. He loves nothing more than making his customers smile. He takes pleasure in letting them dream and imagine themselves the way they want to be. But there’s more to life than the ideal of fun and games. Cheche’s keen eye for the ladies can also get him into all sorts of trouble – as he knows all too well when he goes home to his wife and small children...

Cheusi Mtungi
Cheusi, the young wife of Cheche has always had a strong sense of family. She married young, when she fell head over heels in love with Cheche. But – hey – the reality of married life is hard. Is it just about having children, cleaning the home and cooking for her husband? Is there more? There are times she wishes she were back in the bosom of the large family where she grew up. But this is the life she chose early on – and she and Cheche will have to work it out the best way possible.

Duma
Good-looking guys are trouble, especially when, like Duma, you just can’t say no. Duma has all the ladies he could ever wish for... except the one angel he would keep forever. Duma was blessed with so many things: looks, charm, health and vigour; and the ability to make his way in any situation, from the ghetto to the high life. So, why can’t he settle down? What restlessness in his soul keeps stopping him from getting the love he wants more than anything else? At the end of the day, without parents or family to guide him, he has only his kid brother, Stephen, to care for – and nobody should mess with him!

Stephen (Dogo-D)
He’s a great kid, bright and talented, who is trying to find his way in a tough world, with lots of friends and influences pulling him away from the straight and narrow path. Stephen has a genius for mathematics, a winning smile and a heart of gold – and all he wants to do is follow his hero bro, Duma. But where will it get him? Stephen – or Dogo D – as his hip-hop loving friends call him is a great kid just trying to get through the bumpy teenage years.

Dafu
What a fool he can be! Cheche’s best friend can fix just about anything as long as it’s electrical. But can he fix his own life? Can he even fix himself up with a girlfriend who will stay, I do, when he asks her to marry him? Dafu is a foil for Cheche, the guy who makes everybody laugh even when he is trying very hard to be serious!
**Shoti**

Nobody speaks about Shoti’s story but it goes back to his birth when the umbilical cord, wrapped around his neck, almost strangulated him. That he is alive today, and generous, loving and warm-hearted, is because Mwanaidi his mother looked after him and protected him from the cruelties of this world. But now, as Cheche’s official assistant at the studio, Shoti is seeing the world anew – and it’s full of hope, excitement as well as trauma and dejection for the child-like Shoti who is learning what it is to be an adult.

**Nusura**

Sometimes beauty is born out of the harshest of places and in the ugliest of circumstances. But men don’t see where how that beauty was cultivated, how it rises from within and flourishes against the odds. They see only her looks, and want to possess her. She was always Duma’s “angel”; and like all angels, she is there to protect and nurture, but if you abuse her or take her for granted, she will one day fly away. Nusura’s story is one of bravery and resolve in a world where men can be ignorant of a woman’s enduring value.

**Tula**

She is so practical, clear-headed and organized that it’s not always easy to see that she too has needs that must be met. In her mid-twenties, Tula has made mistakes in life and she has far too many regrets for someone so young. Yet her business acumen – she runs a successful kigrosari – means she is never short of material needs. It’s just that her emotional needs are neglected. How long can she continue an affair with a married man, Cheche, who was her sweetheart from schooldays? And when will she find the fulfillment that has eluded her?

**Lulu**

Don’t mess with this Shangirling! Some women just get what they want – whatever the cost, whatever business, they just know exactly what they need. And it’s certainly not a husband’s love. Oh no. Plain old loving will do. In a world where money is king and it pays to say your mind without fear or favour, Lulu is queen. You better believe it, otherwise she will be knocking at your door soon enough and Lulu’s someone who won’t take no for an answer.

**Kizito**

He’s the patriarch, the polygamist, master of his domain. If you have car trouble, there’s no better place to fix things than at Kizito’s mechanical workshop. There, he is more like a surgeon than a grease monkey. And at home, Mzee Kizito, with his 3 wives and 17 children, heads an impeccable household that is the envy of his community. He is a leader. He loves culture, especially Taarab music. He has everything. Or does he? Has Mzee Kizito just got too many things to take care of and how will he cope when things start to fall apart?
Farida
The first wife of Mzee Kizito might have been a different woman if she’d been born in the 21st century. But she comes from a time when women got married young, had lots of children, and cooked and cared for others without complaint. She resented Kizito for taking on a second wife, Mwanaidi; and when he took his third, Vingawaji, she learned to detest the competition. After all, wasn’t she Kizito’s Queen? And now that she is getting old shouldn’t she enjoy the rights and privileges of Number One? Try usurping Farida and see what you get. She’s afraid of nobody – and she is friends with the witchdoctor, Mgongo.

Mwanaidi
The second of Mzee Kizito’s wives, she long ago decided that the communal household was too much for her, especially under the hornet’s wing of Kizito’s first wife, Farida. And so, she blithely extracted herself from the hustle and bustle of Kizito’s compound to bring up her three children independently. She never wanted to bear lots of children just for the sake of it and that has earned her plenty of criticism. But Mwanaidi is a tough-minded woman of strong opinions and values, who knows the difference between right and wrong, and would rather be left to live her life without others walking all over her.

Masharubu
Where others bring light into a room, Masharubu fills it with darkness. Where others make the world a better place, his role in life is to exact misery on others – as he did with his beautiful daughter, Nusura, making her life a living hell. Money sticks to him like excrement. A slum lord and ghetto boss, he ruthlessly exploits the poor people around him, extorting money from them in the form of rent and usurious loans. In exchange he offers them hovels to live in. He and his notorious henchmen run criminal rackets without any threat of punishment from the law.
Like all good stories, the script for the television drama series, Siri ya Mtungi, has many ingredients: diligent research, timely contributions from educators, activists and artistes, as well as that additional spicy mix of drama, humour and imagination that gives television entertainment its special flavour.

Back in May 2011 in Dar es Salaam, Media for Development International (MFDI) gathered together writers, actors, producers and artistes along with some social and technical experts from Johns Hopkins University and a number of Tanzanian NGOs to see how best they could help to prevent the spread of HIV.

The technical experts had piles of data on a number of interventions, like male circumcision and anti-retroviral therapy that enables HIV+ pregnant women to give birth to HIV-free babies.

But they needed artistes to help them tell the human story behind the facts.

They needed storytellers to tell the real story.

That meeting bore fruit. From creative discussion, characters were born that would become the life-blood of a new television drama series, Siri ya Mtungi:

- Cheche, the photographer, whose eye for the ladies threatens to ruin every blessing in his life, including his wife and family;
- Handsome Duma who can have every woman he desires, yet can’t find the happiness he craves with his one true love;
- Beautiful Nusura, who overcomes the odds, to triumph in a cruel world;
- Mzee Kizito, who seems to have it all, but has to learn that some things in life are bigger than him, he is not the ruler of the invisible world…
- …As well as a rich cast of supporting characters that make up this fascinating Siri ya Mtungi universe.

Each character has a personal journey, marked by many challenges. Yet, each of these individuals is connected – to family, to community and to a notion of the common humanity that binds us all.

The question for the artistes was how to turn information that excites scientists into drama that appeals to ordinary people.
The story did not come about in a flash. Every story unfolds one step at a time. Drip by drip the vessel that holds the story is filled.

The next step in the script development process was to flesh out a storyline, weaving together the individual narratives.

MFDI brought in Zimbabwean dramatist, Andrew Whaley – who had worked on several of their features, More Time, Everyone’s Child and Yellow Card, not to mention work on the popular Tanzanian radio drama, Wahapahapa. He worked with veteran writer, Ali Mbwana, and singer and cultural activist, Carola Kinasha, in developing the first season of 13 episodes of Siri ya Mtungi.

The resulting teleplay is a network of complex, gritty and overlapping stories that will grip the audience. The drama not only captures the struggles of individuals; but, as many stories weave together, the series reveals the richness, diversity and complexity of Tanzanian society as it comes to grips with its own hopeful future.

The first season of Siri ya Mtungi goes to air on December 9 2012. Over the course of 13 episodes, the drama series deals with the joy, laughter, heartbreak and hope of everyday life as ordinary people face life-changing challenges.

Siri ya Mtungi, created by Media for Development International, allows audiences to go behind closed doors and share intimate thoughts and feelings of Tanzanian characters.
The decision to create a high-quality television series that speaks directly to the people of Tanzania and East Africa has the potential to revolutionize the media landscape.

When Media for Development International (MFDI) was commissioned by Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health Center for Communication Programs (JHU•CCP) with funding from the US Agency for International Development (USAID) to produce the television series, it was the start of something much bigger than the monetary investment.

Since it was established in 2006, MFDI has become a creative hub in Dar es Salaam – giving life to the arts industry and its workers, whilst setting markers for communication of Tanzanian reality.

Before the advent of the television series, MFDI was already operating at a high level of activity. The well-known radio series, Wahapahapa, also produced with support from the American People and broadcast for three years on Tanzanian radio, was the foundation for this artistic growth.

During those years hundreds of actors and musicians entered the hub, now known as the Wahapahapa Studios, to participate in the production of 156 episodes of the musical radio drama. Music from that show was recorded and distributed under the Wahapahapa label. There was even a new band launched called, perhaps unsurprisingly, The Wahapahapa Band which continues to be among the most successful performing bands in Dar es Salaam.

The Siri ya Mtungi television series has taken MFDI’s output to another level.

Not only has the project brought new skills and opportunities to actors, musicians, artists and crew who are the backbone of this textured vision of Tanzania, but the stories of the characters in this television series are drawn from a reservoir of 150 million Kiswahili speakers in East Africa.

And thus, Siri ya Mtungi has the potential to be a touchstone, reference and talking point in the lives of thousands and perhaps millions of Tanzanians.

MFDI Country Director, John Riber, has not experienced anything like it in his long career making films and dramas, from India and Bangladesh to Zimbabwe and Tanzania.

For Riber, the series has allowed him to combine the magic of film together with the necessity of development and the power of education.

“I discovered early in my career that what I really wanted to do was to harness the power of film as a direct intervention in the process of development or social transformation. I wanted to use film for audiences in developing countries, making films FOR Development, as opposed to making films ABOUT Development. And that is how we approach our all work at MFDI.”

With a track record of making popular films in Africa – like Consequences, More Time, It’s Not Easy, Yellow Card and Neria – Riber’s brand has also been to “get audiences to care about the issues.”
And so, Siri ya Mtungi, as with many of the films that have gone before it, gets under the skin of characters that people already “know and love.”

“A film like Consequences, about teenage pregnancy, that we made 25 years ago, is still being shown today. And that is because it’s about people we know. You watch that film and maybe you think: That could be me.

“With a television series like Siri ya Mtungi, we are doing something exactly the same – except it’s bigger. There are now a dozen or more characters, all with interesting lives and situations, weaving through the story.”

In the TV series, characters are facing the issues that challenge all Tanzanians. They want to know how to make their lives better. Sometimes they can; sometimes they are unable to or they just don’t know how to.

As Riber says: “Yes, we make movies about development. But we don’t preach or hand out answers. The issues in our daily lives are complex. There are no easy answers. And that is what makes the drama.”

“We can’t offer simple solutions. But we can offer stories that give hope, that show that people are not alone as they face challenges. The TV series gets behind closed doors. We see and hear the intimate side of relationships.”

“Courage is a huge aspect of MFDI films,” Riber said. “And in Siri ya Mtungi you will find a cast of really appealing, complex characters who battle with decisions about what to do with their lives. Many find the courage to take a stand and not be victims. They are the future.”
Cheche: Juma Rajab Rashid

“Prepare yourselves for something unique!”

Juma Rajab Rashid fought off stiff competition from well-known actors to land the leading role of Cheche, a young man who is desperately trying to balance his growing family against the demands of his new photography business, not to mention the tempting distractions of the women he meets in his line of work.

“His biggest weakness is temptation. He loves his wife, but he also loves women,” Juma says of Cheche, the character he plays.

“He wants a happy and prosperous family. Unfortunately, though, he rarely gets what he wants and often what he expects is not what he gets,” says Juma of the hapless photographer who often finds himself in tricky – and therefore humorous – situations.

Juma says, “Audiences should prepare themselves for something very unique!”

Cheche’s complexity made the role a demanding one for the 34 year old actor, best known for his performance in “Men’s Day Out” which earned him the ZIFF 2011 Best Upcoming Artiste award.

Juma found himself having to play a womanizer. “I'm not such a person in reality.” He had to consume beer. “I don't drink alcohol at all!”

But the greatest challenges came on the film set when he was often required to be up at 4am and act in every single scene until the crew wrapped at midnight.

“We worked long hours. In local productions one finds that the job is done in one or two takes but we were doing 13 up to 20 takes to get the right shots.”

“There were moments when I was frustrated by the director, because he was so persistent,” Juma explains, “but this was very positive because he managed to help me become a better actor and to really squeeze out the character I was playing.”

His character, Cheche, was full of surprises. “Many local scripts are predictable. Siri ya Mtungi is not predictable, and I was often even surprised at what my character was up to… which is a wonderful thing!”
Tanzanians should get ready for a big dose of real life when they watch Siri ya Mtungi, says actress Godliver Gordian, who plays the major role of Cheusi in the drama series.

“The Tanzanian audience better be ready for this series! Because we’ve taken the authentic Tanzanian, from the coast, and nothing is ‘flowered’. When you see a housewife she really is just a housewife. When you see someone from the ghetto it’s authentic,” she said in an interview.

“So Tanzanians will see themselves in this series and will be able to relate to the characters,” said Godliver, 26, whose previous credits include performances in Mahabuba and Danger Zone.

The role of Cheusi seems simple enough – a mother of two children expecting her third child. But the challenges of being a good wife, maintaining a family and home are difficult in the modern environment and, in this drama, are complicated by the fact that Cheusi longs to stand up for herself.

Godliver really had to work hard to be aware of the camera, listen to the director and juggle all the demands of movie acting. But, she concluded, “It was the most perfect production I had ever worked on.”
“We accomplished something never done before in Tanzania…”

“This is the beginning of a revolution happening in our industry!” said actor Daudi Michael Tairo who plays heartthrob, Duma, in the compelling series of love and betrayal in the television series, Suri ya Mtungi.

“We’ve accomplished something that has never been done in Tanzania before, in terms of quality and capacity,” he said in an interview. “It’s like we’re being born into a new experience and world. One can say that Suri ya Mtungi is Tanzania’s birth day!”

The 28-year-old actor who played in Upside Down (2008), Aunt Suszy, The Season of Love, as well as Magic Money, a film he produced, directed and acted in this year, found working on the television series “a very different and new experience for our industry.”

He plays Duma, a hustler and deejay, in love with the elusive Nusura, who steals “in order to make ends meet, put his brother through school, put food on the table and pay rent.”

Shooting long hours was completely absorbing for the professional performer. He confessed: “My happiest moments were when I was being picked up every morning. We live in the ghetto (uswahilini) and have to be careful of muggers, so I appreciated being picked up and dropped off during production. Especially because of the long hours and being so exhausted.”

“There were days when my body wanted to stop due to long working hours, but I had to force myself to continue because there was a whole team relying on me as an artist and I didn’t want to disappoint anyone!”

Daudi feels one season of 13 episodes of Suri ya Mtungi is just not enough of a good thing. He wants more.

“We need a second season so that MFDI doesn’t look like it came with the ‘energy of a soda’ (Nguvu ya soda).”

“Bring on the second birthday and all the other ones to follow,” pleaded Daudi.
“Girls my age will relate to the character I play!”

Hidaya Maeda had never even dreamed of acting before she got a leading role in the television drama series, Siri ya Mtungi.

The closest the beautiful 26-year-old actress had ever got to performing was as a beauty pageant queen. She was Miss International Tanzania (1999) amongst numerous other modeling awards she’s won.

It was a huge leap for Hidaya to go from fashion modeling to capturing the character of Nusura, a brave young woman who overcomes many adversities.

“Nusura doesn’t seem to find what she’s looking for when it comes to love. She is looking for sincere love, which she’s never received from her father or from her male relationships.”

In the end, Nusura does find love, explains Hidaya, “but not where she expected.”

Helped by the director and a gripping story, Hidaya’s acting debut became a journey of discovery. “Each day of production I was learning something new,” she says enthusiastically – all the more remarkable because she had only recently given birth.

“I had a three month old child, so when I was up I had to get my child up too. At first I felt like I was being bullied but the production management looked after me, and my child, very well. I was very content.”

Hidaya feels audiences will be excited about her role.

“Girls my age will look at Nusura, and relate to her and what she’s going through. This goes for all the characters in Siri ya Mtungi. There’ll be Tanzanians who can relate to each one of them.”

The first season of 13 episodes will be great, Hidaya says, but Season 2, slated for 2013 has even more in store.

“I feel that the audience will be very excited about the series and they’ll anticipate the second season eagerly because this season poses the questions, and the next season will bring some answers!”
Mzee Kizito: Nkwabi Elias Ng’hangasamala

"Siri goes deep into the lives of real Tanzanians…"

Nkwabi Nghangasamala, who plays the respected community leader, Mzee Kizito, in Siri ya Mtungi, felt as if he’d been at college learning the art of acting for camera during the filming of Siri ya Mtungi.

“I feel my performance techniques have improved since being part of Siri ya Mtungi. One could say I was in college learning how to act in front of the camera,” he said in an interview.

His character, Mzee Kizito, begins as a role model for the community. He is a polygamist with a refined sense of culture who values justice and integrity, and tries to maintain a harmonious household with his wives and many children. But when his third wife dies and he brings in a replacement, the serenity of his household is tested – and so it Kizito’s character.

Nkwabi’s background as an actor is in theatre. He has, however, had roles in films such as Nawaachieni and Finbo ya Baba.

“The main difference between Siri ya Mtungi and Bongo films is that this series has gone ‘deep’ into the authenticity and reality of the characters lives,” he said. The sets and locations are realistic as is the characters’ clothing.

“In a Bongo film one would find a character like Kizito being surrounded by many prestigious items just because he’s well off,” he said. But this series deals with the actuality of the lives of “genuine Tanzanians.”

Nkwabi enjoyed working in an ensemble cast where the actors dissected their roles and really had to understand how each character related to the other. The flowing storylines of the first 13 episodes have set up the major issues and connections within the story.

“Now I’m looking forward to the second season,” he added, “where I expect to see major psychological and life conflicts among the characters.”
Suleimani Mambo Suleiman plays one of the most engaging yet demanding roles in Siri ya Mtungi, that of Shotti, a young man who is mentally challenged.

“I did research to understand Shotti, a character who is mentally challenged,” Suleimani said in an interview.

“These people live in our communities. I would like to commend MFDI because this story portrays a positive picture of a mentally challenged individual.”

It’s not uncommon to mistreat the mentally challenged people, Suleimani said. But the reverse is true in this positive portrayal.

“His father, Mzee Kizito, takes on the responsibility of enrolling Shotti in school so he gets an education, and we see Shotti in employment. Shotti becomes an independent individual who can also one day have a family of his own, and be responsible for them.”

Suleimani’s sympathetic portrayal shows Shotti’s curiosity and sense of responsibility towards others. He helps out his brother-in-law, Cheche, in the studio.

The actor was impressed by the attention to every little detail of location, set design, wardrobe and actor preparation and was never happier than when he was preparing and learning his script.

“I think Siri ya Mtungi is excellent! I know that anyone who misses an episode will scramble to watch the re-runs and if they miss these, then… I don’t know what hell will break loose!”

He foresees that this Tanzania-made production that will set fashion trends too, as women in the audience look to copy the clothing and hairstyles of the main characters.

“I think audiences will get hooked on Siri ya Mtungi,” said the actor who can’t wait to get his teeth into an even bigger role in Season 2.
INTERVIEW: JOHN RIBER, PRODUCER

“You don’t need a lot of money to make a hugely successful film. You need a good idea, a good story and good performances,” said the producer of Siri ya Mtungi and director of Media for Development International, the Dar-based communication agency.

Riber believes the 13-part series that premieres Season 1 on ITV and EATV from December 9 2012 “is going to make a difference.”

“I think it is going to wow the local industry. I think there are going to be a lot of local filmmakers and film enthusiasts who are going to be inspired by what we have achieved with Siri. In terms of production values, performance and so on, there is nothing like it.”

He predicts it will be “a big hit with the public and Swahili speaking audiences.”

It also fulfils MFDI’s mandate in the development sector because the issues this drama raises are both “fun and meaningful.”

Siri ya Mtungi will first be launched with broadcast partners, ITV and East Africa TV on primetime Sunday and Wednesday evening slots with repeats.

The series will be released on DVD after the broadcast. Riber said that the DVD release would expand the reach of this series to a much wider audience, allowing people to watch the programmes over and over again.

High-quality programming like Siri ya Mtungi will appeal beyond Tanzania’s borders, Riber said, to a larger Kiswahili speaking African catchment estimated at over one hundred and fifty million viewers.

“We intend to dub it to English and French and Portuguese so it can travel easily across the African continent. This program is going to have a very long shelf life – decades for sure!”

Riber came to Tanzania from Zimbabwe where his brand of socially conscious filmmaking earned him kudos around Africa. Feature film titles such as Consequences, Neria, More Time, Everyone’s Child and Yellow Card have become household names for a generation of African viewers. Siri ya Mtungi, the first television series he has produced, brings the MFDI product into people’s homes.

“This programming is designed specifically for African audiences and in particular East African audiences,” he said. The series is “relevant to the realities of Tanzanian life.”

“Tanzanians, like everyone else, want to see their own reality on screen, as opposed to realities of someone living in LA or Lagos,” Riber said in an interview.

A hunger for locally flavoured stories has given rise to a growing, shoestring budget, Kiswahili film industry, termed Swahiliwood. Said Riber: “As the cradle of Swahili, Tanzania has the most promising indigenous film industry on the continent.”

Riber believes that the Tanzanian industry is heading in the same direction as the Nigerian film industry, Nollywood, which is now the second largest national employer after government in the West African state.

“What is so exciting is that film creates a lot of employment, especially for the youth. And this industry is a form of self expression which helps identify culture and society.”
The Siti television series was shot relatively quickly (13 episodes in 16 weeks) on a modest budget considering its high production values.

“We used high-end digital cameras, HMI lights, dollies and cranes. Thanks to digital technologies, it cost a lot less than what it cost to make Yellow Card shot on 35mm.”

Riber’s credo is to set productions standards high but “be realistic when it comes to budgets.”

“I can’t afford to hire Steven Spielberg to direct the series. These programs are being funded by public money and there is a lot of responsibility that comes with that,” he said of the fact that Siti is funded through USAID. “Our responsibility includes building local capacity by creating or enhancing local skills.”

“This industry has tremendous potential to address the underlying problems of many developing countries, poverty reduction through employment creation,” he said. “These are not commercial ventures. Films that can make a difference in peoples lives are the only films I’m interested in making.”

Yet the film industry has some way to go in convincing financiers, public or private, to back the potential of movie making in the region.

“In the private sector the financiers are worried about maximizing profits. In the public sector funding agencies are concerned about offending someone. And this is understandable; filmmaking is high profile business. We shoulder a lot of responsibility; and especially in a cross-cultural context.”

It’s not a responsibility Riber has ever shirked. MFDI has always taken on difficult issues – like women’s rights and the many dramas around sexual health and HIV – and turned them into entertainment.

“For me HIV is about love and violence, it’s about wealth and poverty, it’s about empowerment, it’s about gender, it’s triumph, it’s tragedy, it’s sexy, it’s violent, it’s family, it’s moving… I always said if you can’t find a way to tell a really good story about HIV, you probably shouldn’t be trying to tell stories.”
INTERVIEW: JORDAN RIBER, DIRECTOR

After four months of shooting the television series, Siri ya Mtungi, director Jordan Riber fell in love all over again with Tanzania, its humanity and its beauty.

"I love the cast of Siri, and I know that audiences will love them too," he said in an interview.

"I learned so much through my daily interactions with them, not just about directing, but about people and life. Being a non-Tanzanian, I had to be very open to new ideas. Often the cast guided me on how things should play out, and not vice versa."

The young director found the huge task daunting at first. His first task was to audition 2000 actors, many professional, but many more first-timers, for a colourful and rich drama that digs deep into peoples’ lives.

"There was so much material to work with. But I found the strong mix of drama and comedy in the story very exciting. We deal with serious issues, that deeply affect the lives of people, but we are doing it in a funny way that people can enjoy."

The beauty of film, Riber explained, is that it allows the audience to get up "close to our characters."

"We can enter their thoughts and be a part of their inner most feelings. We can be part of what torments them and what makes them love and hate."

The series was shot about forty per cent in the studio and sixty per cent on location, with three weeks in Bagamoyo, fifty kilometres north of Dar es Salaam. Riber says the crew was "very well received by the people and authorities in Bagamoyo, and it was a pleasure to shoot in such a beautiful place."

Shooting ‘on location’ brings its own challenges, however, Riber says. "Near the equator the light is harsh, the sound is uncontrollable, the clouds are very intermittent, and the sun is hot and unforgiving. But at the end of the day I think that we had the right mix of studio and location shooting for what we were trying to achieve."

"The on-location work is very important to give the story its setting, with sounds and smells, streets full of people, an ocean. It reminds us that this is a story that happens somewhere real."

The purpose-built Wahapahapa studios in Msasani, where the interior scenes were filmed, gave the director and crew freedom to control the technical aspects of production.

"The studio allows us to work with camera and lights. We have space behind the walls of the set to set up camera and control lighting."

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The shooting studios were also housed in the same building with other department offices like wardrobe, picture editing and music recording, and all this creativity added to the excitement of production as artistes, performers and camera and sound crew rubbed shoulders.

Many friends and relationships were made.

“Romances were born and some undoubtedly faded. Others continue to this day,” said Jordan. “It was great to see everyone grow in their roles as well.”

The crew was made up of a healthy mix of “a few seasoned professionals from Europe and the United States, and others from the Kenyan film industry, which has a much longer history than the Tanzanian industry. We all learned a lot from these people, and we will take these tools forward,” he said.

It was an amazing learning experience for a director who says his job was “to manage the many moving – and living, breathing – parts of the process of telling a film’s story. Often the best approach is to step back, trust the instincts of actors, and see what happens.”

The greatest reward for the young director, though, would be a positive reception by the Tanzanian people. Does he think they’ll enjoy the series?

“I’d like people to be proud, and have no doubt that they will be. It will be a real eye opener for people to see a truly Tanzanian story, told in such pure Kiswahili, with such high production values,” he said.

“As filmmakers, writers, musicians, and artists in general, we have a great responsibility to society, not only to entertain, but to communicate around issues that we face as people. Artists play a huge role in social development.”

Siri ya Mtungi engages with heartfelt and tough issues in our society in an engaging and entertaining way. Said Ribes: “I truly feel that the best art is meaningful art, and when it is done right, it touches people in a very different way than art-for-art-sake.”

“I think that Siri is a prime example of meaningful art done right, stories about real people with real problems and struggles that many of us are familiar with.”