CALL ME QUEEN

EIN FILM VON **EMILY ATEF**



Interview with the main actress

ELIANE UMUHIRE

BIOGRAPHY OF ELIANE UMUHIRE



Eliane Umuhire is an award-winning Rwandan-French actress who made her international breakthrough with ***BIRDS ARE SINGING IN KIGALI*** (2017), for which she won Best Actress awards at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, the Chicago International Film Festival and the New York Polish Film Festival, amongst others.

Her other credits include Baloji Tshiani's ***AUGURE*** (2023), which won the Prix de la Nouvelle Voix at Cannes; ***PLANET B*** (2024) by Aude Léa Rapin, which premiered at the Venice International Film Festival; and ***A QUIET PLACE: DAY ONE*** (2024), alongside Lupita Nyong'o and Djimon Hounsou.

In 2024, she was **a jury member at the Semaine de la Critique** in Cannes. In 2025, she was appointed patron of the **Pavillon Afronova** in Cannes and is a co-founder of the **'Sisterhood' initiative,** which aims to foster networking between African and European filmmakers.

In **CALL ME QUEEN** (2026) by Emily Atef, she takes on the lead role of Queen Achungo.

FILMOGRAPHY (selection)
2026 CALL ME QUEEN by Emily Atef
2026 *A BLUE BUTTERFLY* by C. J. Obasi
2025 *A PLACE FOR HER* by Mélisa Godet
2024 A QUIET PLACE: DAY ONE by Michael Sarnoski
2024 PLANET B by Aude Léa Rapin
2023 AUGURE by Baloji Tshiani,
2021 NEPTUNE FROST by Anisia Uzeyman, Saul Williams
2017 BIRDS ARE SINGING IN KIGALI by Joanna Kos-Krauze, Krzysztof Krauze

INTERVIEW WITH ELIANE UMUHIRE

Queen is a woman who never gives up, even in the hardest moments. How did you prepare for this role? Were there women in your own life who inspired your portrayal of Queen?

A few stories and testimonies helped me prepare for Queen. Wangari Maathai's autobiography painted a picture of a woman for whom 'no' was never an option, a woman who realised at a very early age that she was one link in a chain – her community – and who rallied and fought alongside that community to protect the environment, putting her life at risk on numerous occasions, until she became the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

The other book that helped me was *28 Millions*, which introduced me to the real-life activists who fought for access to antiretrovirals – people who risked their reputations and their lives by speaking openly about their HIV-positive status, at the risk of social rejection.

I also grew up in a country where women played a central role in rebuilding and healing an entire nation: Rwanda. And I watched videos of Kenyan women marching with such fierce determination, demanding protection for their bodies and their rights. The stories of all these women inspired me and kept me moving forward. Playing Queen was my way of honouring them.

CALL ME QUEEN tells the story of a grassroots movement and sheds light on a chapter of African history that many people still know nothing about. What stayed with you after filming?

I learnt so much about this period. I lived through that time without realising what was happening behind the scenes. I remember seeing and hearing about families being wiped out, about couples dying of AIDS and their children being taken in by other family members or family friends. Some children never knew where their parents were buried, so they could not mourn them. I never knew that people had risked their lives to fight for fair access to life-saving antiretrovirals. I am filled with gratitude and respect for all the activists who made it possible for millions of people to live a life just like anyone else's.

And what moves me most is that this pressure came from the grassroots. Ordinary citizens organised themselves and called on the WHO and the pharmaceutical companies to make treatment affordable, and they succeeded: prices fell, generic drugs became available, and millions of people are alive today because of that struggle.

All of this has stayed with me, along with the fact that life-saving medicines are still out of reach for a large proportion of the world's population. We are still not equal in the face of illness and death.

Another lasting memory is the energy of the marching scene. Kenyans are used to standing up for their rights and holding their authorities to account, and they inspired us with their passion. The scene came to life so vividly; it felt so authentic.

The film was shot in Kenya with a predominantly Kenyan cast and crew. What was that experience like for you, and how did it influence your performance?

I took away memories of a fantastic, efficient and generous team, and the Kenyan cast and crew brought a level of talent and dedication that lifted everyone's spirits. Kenya is a neighbour of Rwanda; I felt at home, and the whole team made us feel that way. Yes, CALL ME QUEEN is set in Kenya, and filming it there, surrounded by people who carry that history within their families and their memories – as we all do – called for honesty and humility on my part. I was reminded every day who this film is for.

Queen is affectionately known as 'Rwandan Gold' by her neighbours – Rwandan tea. As a Rwandan yourself, how did you relate to Queen, and were there aspects of Rwandan culture that influenced how you portrayed her?

In fact, 'Rwandan Gold' was not given to her because of Rwandan tea, but because of how she transformed the local beer. She created her own blend based on Rwandan beer, and that made her popular. It is a beautiful illustration of how Queen became part of this community: she took something from home and turned it into something shared.

As a Rwandan, that is how I related to her. Wherever we go, we carry our country with us – its dignity, its resilience, its sense of community. Queen brings about change in her community in the same way that the women I grew up with held people together.

The friendship between Queen and Anna is at the heart of the film. How did you and Denise Gough develop that relationship on screen?

Queen and Anna's relationship is a political act. We were both aware that there was a great deal at stake: a friendship between an African woman and a European woman in that era carries with it a whole history, and the film examines that balance of power with honesty. What I love is that it doesn't oversimplify anything. Anna's desire for solidarity is sincere, yet it is also complicated, because it bears the weight of that shared history. And yet, the two women find a genuine mutual

understanding. For me, that is the hope the film conveys: this friendship is possible, but it must be built with clarity.

As Bell Hooks says in *From Margin to Centre*: “Women do not need to eradicate difference to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression.”

Denise Gough is an artist who is deeply dedicated to her craft, who questions everything and is always one step ahead. She is an activist in her own right. Her knowledge, her empathy and her talent brought so much depth to this relationship.

Emily Atef’s films are known for their emotional honesty and nuanced female characters. What was your collaboration with her like, and how did she help you find Queen’s voice and emotional journey?

It was a wonderful collaboration. I’m a fan of Emily’s work, of the way she portrays female characters. One of her films that really made an impression on me was *More Than Ever*, in which she tackles one of the biggest taboos in our society: death. Our collaboration on *Call Me Queen* continued to evolve throughout the shoot. I remember Emily telling me that Queen isn’t a perfect person, nor is she a saint. That helped me understand Queen’s inner world better, and it gave me the freedom to portray a fully-fledged human being, with her flaws, her anger and her doubts.

I also had great respect for the way she agreed to tell a story set in a country that is not her own, a new culture. She approached it with humility and a willingness to listen, and she surrounded herself with the right people.

Queen’s courage and optimism stay with audiences long after the credits roll. What do you hope people take away with them when they leave the cinema?

That each of us, on a personal level, has the power to bring about change in our communities. The movement depicted in the film did not begin with institutions; it began with ordinary people who refused to give up and who built a community around a shared struggle. The film offers a clear-eyed view of injustice, but it also shows that a fairer world can be achieved through active engagement. If audiences leave the cinema carrying a little of Queen’s courage and optimism, the film will have done its job.