CALL ME QUEEN

EIN FILM VON **EMILY ATEF**



Interview with the director
EMILY ATEF

BIOGRAPHY OF EMILY ATEF



Emily Atef was born in Berlin to French-Iranian parents. After living in Los Angeles, France and the UK, she studied film directing at the German Film and Television Academy Berlin (dffb).

Her feature film debut, **MOLLY'S WAY** (2005), already won awards at the Munich Film Festival and the Mar del Plata International Film Festival, amongst others.

Her second feature film, **DAS FREMDE IN MIR ("THE STRANGER IN ME")** (2008), about a young mother suffering from postnatal depression, also won several awards and premiered at the Semaine de la Critique at the Cannes International Film Festival.

With **3 TAGE IN QUIBERON (3 DAYS IN QUIBERON)** (2018), Emily Atef created a powerful portrait of the actress Romy Schneider, based on her legendary final interview with the German magazine, "Stern". The film celebrated its world premiere in the Competition section of the 68th Berlin International Film Festival and won seven German Film Awards, including Best Film and Best Director.

Her most recent works include the drama **MEHR DENN JE (MORE THAN EVER)** (2022), starring Vicky Krieps and Gaspard Ulliel, which premiered in the Un Certain Regard section at the Cannes Film Festival, and **IRGENDWANN WERDEN WIR UNS ALLES ERZÄHLEN (SOMEDAY WE'LL TELL EACH OTHER EVERYTHING)** (2023), which also premiered in the Berlinale Competition.

CALL ME QUEEN (2026) celebrated its German premiere at the Filmfest Hamburg. The screenplay was co-written with Josune Hahnheiser, the Kenyan author Hawa Essuman and Jeannine Dominy, based on the novel 'Mercy' by Lara Santoro.

FILMOGRAPHY (selection)
2026 CALL ME QUEEN
2023 SOMEDAY WE'LL TELL EACH OTHER EVERYTHING
2022 MORE THAN EVER
2022 Killing Eve
2018 3 DAYS IN QUIBERON
2012 KILL ME
2008 THE STRANGER WITHIN ME
2005 Molly's Way

INTERVIEW WITH EMILY ATEF

Based on true events, CALL ME QUEEN tells a story of solidarity, self-determination and the fight for access to life-saving medicines. What was it about this story that moved you so deeply that you wanted to tell it?

I still remember the late 1990s very well, along with the news reports from that time and the tendency to look away because the suffering was so great. In fact, it all happened in full view of the whole world, yet most people looked away nonetheless. Alarmingly little has changed since then -- Covid, Ebola and other crises keep showing the same pattern: 'The Western World First'. There is a lack of genuine solidarity, of humanity, of empathy for the suffering of people who are far away and therefore seem to affect us less. Once again, we are seeing this very clearly today.

And then there's this story, which shows just how much individuals can still achieve and inspire.

Queen and Anna come from completely different walks of life and initially approach each other with mistrust. Nevertheless, a friendship develops between them on an equal footing. Why was this dynamic so important to you?

One of the reasons why this project interested me so much is that Queen is a very strong, uncompromising woman who makes no apologies for anything. That automatically brings tension and development to the story. Equality between the two was essential for us, so that they could inspire each other unreservedly.

It was particularly important to us that the impetus for change came from Queen and her community, not from Anna; that it wasn't the white protagonist who provided the impetus and made the change possible. We wanted to avoid that at all cost.

It was just as important to us that Anna also comes to understand that she can stand by Queen's side and support her, but that she must let go and allow Queen and her community to go their own way, even if she disagrees with some of their choices.

You and Josune Hahnheiser developed the screenplay together with the Kenyan author Hawa Essuman, based on Lara Santoro's novel "Mercy". How did this collaboration shape your perspective on the story?

I travelled to Nairobi several times to do research and I met a great many people there, all of whom had a very personal story linked to the AIDS epidemic. When I was in Nairobi for five months for pre-production and filming, the same thing emerged time and again in all my conversations with the team -- everyone in the Kenyan team and the cast had their own story of loss due to AIDS to tell. This made everything we'd researched so thoroughly beforehand feel very concrete and real once more, and it brought home to me once again just how relevant this issue still is.

And right from the start, it was also very important to us during the development phase to work with a Kenyan writer. Hawa Essuman brought an authentic perspective to the story and contributed countless details that lend the narrative its credibility. Above all, however, she enriched our discussions with a lived knowledge that no amount of thorough research can replace. And, of course, she revised the dialogue together with George Mungai, who was always on set as well.

The film tells an African story from the perspective of the people who lived through it. At the same time, the cast and crew were international. How important was it to you to work closely with the Kenyan team, both in front of and behind the camera?

To tell an African story authentically, it was clear to us from the outset that this could only be achieved through the closest possible collaboration with a predominantly Kenyan team. Our producer, Gian-Piero Ringel, even managed to negotiate special arrangements so that we could bring more Kenyan staff onto the project.

It was an extraordinary experience, and I felt very well looked after and supported on a personal level. I've filmed in many countries, but what particularly impressed me in Kenya was the joy they took in their work. It wasn't an easy shoot, but what I'd never experienced in any other country was this love for their work and a great sense of pride in telling precisely this story.

In the West, the fight for access to life-saving medicines has been led by the queer movement. Movements such as ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), which in the late 1980s protested against political inaction and the stigmatisation of AIDS in original and media-effective ways, are still not discussed enough here either. CALL ME QUEEN also explores a part of African history. What was it like working with the real-life activists on the project?

At its core, my aim is to show that non-violent struggle and active resistance are more important today than ever before. Back then, Kenyan women took to the streets to fight for emancipation and access to life-saving medicines. Today, the struggle in Kenya is still about equality – evident, for example, in the protests against femicide – but also about fundamental democratic rights, the fight against corruption and resistance to authoritarian political decisions. The activists from back then remain heroines to this day. Some of them took part in the demonstration we show in the film, and their songs continue to be an expression of this resistance.

During filming, however, I also got to know a new generation of political activists. They are protesting against corruption, police violence and the government under President William Ruto, and are calling for democratic reforms. Members of our team were also part of this movement and took part in the protests, risking their lives in the process. These issues are relevant across the globe -- from the fears of many Americans under Donald Trump and the international consequences of his policies, to the stagnating – or, in several regions of the world, increasing – numbers of new HIV infections

CALL ME QUEEN is set in the late 1990s, yet many of the questions the film raises remain relevant today, such as access to medicines and global inequality. What makes the film, for you, a story about our present?

When it comes to access to life-saving medicines, there are clear parallels with that era -- wealthy nations are usually able to procure new drugs early on and in large quantities, whilst poorer countries generally gain access later and are additionally confronted with issues relating to price, patents, infrastructure and supply problems.

One example of this is Paxlovid, one of the most important antiviral medicines against COVID-19. Whilst large quantities were procured in Germany – a significant proportion of which remained unused and later had to be destroyed – the medicine arrived late, if at all, in many countries of the Global South.
Of course, there are also positive developments and examples of progress, which I by no means wish to detract from. Nevertheless, it is clear that many of the questions raised by CALL ME QUEEN remain unresolved to this day and are of immediate urgency.

CALL ME QUEEN | Interview with the director Emily Atef

CALL ME QUEEN is a reflection on the empowerment and emancipation of individuals, communities and entire societies. The film's themes extend far beyond that particular period and remain not only relevant but fundamentally valid to this day.

I invite the audience to engage with the film emotionally first, and only subsequently on an intellectual level. I hope that in doing so, we will stimulate reflection, awaken a desire for engagement and, ultimately, encourage people to take action.

In your films, you often tell the stories of women who find their own path and stand up to societal expectations. What links "Queen" to the protagonists of your earlier films?

What connects "Queen" and the protagonists of my earlier films, in my view, is that they are female characters who undergo a profound inner transformation and, in the process, discover their own strength – usually in circumstances that push them to their limits. They all revolve around self-determination. Women who stand up for themselves and forge their own path, even in the face of opposition.

CALL ME QUEEN shows that social change often stems from individuals who have the courage to take the first step. Do you believe that cinema can provide such impetus and encourage people to take action themselves?

Yes, absolutely. And for us, that is one of the key aspects of this film. It's not just about access to life-saving medicines, but about resistance and the power of community in the fight against injustice. And that is precisely what makes the film so incredibly relevant even today.

Cinema can provide precisely that kind of impetus. Stories like that of Queen show that change doesn't have to come from institutions or large organisations, but often begins with the courage of individuals who join forces and stand up for what matters to them. When a film brings that to life, it can encourage people to take action.

What kind of feeling should the audience leave CALL ME QUEEN with? And what do you hope the audience will take home with them after watching CALL ME QUEEN?

'We Have the Power.' Hope, and a sense of our own agency and strength. We hold the power in our own hands when we come together. And anyone can take the first step. Every single person counts.

CALL ME QUEEN is a film about women's self-determination and solidarity. Which women in world history inspire you or have inspired you?

There are many women who inspire me, including Wangari Maathai, who was the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize and who worked tirelessly for environmental protection and women's rights in Kenya; and Jane Goodall. She had this way of being very gentle yet incredibly stubborn at the same time, and it's incredible that, at a time when she was hardly taken seriously, she actually built up an entire movement.

My mother is a huge role model. Her humanism and activism shaped me from a very young age. Time and again, we lived alongside refugees during my youth. Even when I was three years old, we used to go to prison once a week to visit a friend from the Ivory Coast who was being held there due to immigration issues. I loved going there with her. That's what it was always about for her -- standing up against injustice and showing empathy. At the same time, she was very outspoken and was never afraid of resistance.