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## a BLOOMING BUSINESS



Reviewed By: Andrew Robertson

In Holland, there is a flower auction house. On tracks cut into concrete floors, tram-like automata carry cargoes of flowers, dispatched from warehouse terminals that dwarf the few humans in their midst. They ferry the stems and petals under an arch of display screens, impenetrable data punctuated by photographs of blooms, an electronic grimoire crashed into the pages of a seed catalogue. Before this video altar, in this chilled temple of floral commerce, labour unnamed servants, stepped ranks of desks like hillside terraces, their fruits scattered laptops, pasty skin under fluorescent lights.

This is not their film.

Aeroplanes serve that auction house, jet bees bringing pollen to a gargantuan hive. They scatter its wares to the corners of the earth, feeding florists across Europe and beyond. More importantly, they harvest them from Kenya, these silver locusts, and it is that country that bears the weight, the ravages, of the industry.



Director Ton van Zantvoort has made a film that will sow in you the seeds of outrage. In a series of interspersed interviews, he introduces his audience to Kenyans who have become victims of this trade. It employs some 300,000 Kenyans, brings 400m Euros into the economy, but it seems little, if any, trickles down.

Jane works on a flower farm, struggles to raise her children, and is victimised by her manager. Oscar is a water seller, taking it from a lake he knows to be unsafe for human consumption because there is no other source. Kennedy is a fisherman on that same lake, lamenting the weeds that choke the shores, an invasive species and European import, but also affected by the degradation of the breeding zones. Geoffrey is an employee now blacklisted after reporting an accident to the government. Agnes bears terrible scars from exposure to chemicals. Peter films secretly himself, horrifying pictures of obvious safety violations. Eunice campaigns for workers rights, telling stories of 'fair trade' white-wash, telling stories (like Jane's) of sexual exploitation.

In the credits it is stated that "this film is not an indictment to the companies and persons in it". That's a lie. This is shocking, on a par with Silent Spring. The toll of the industry on Kenya is appalling.

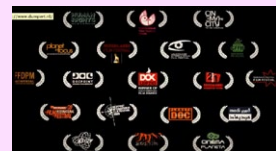
Two moments in particular stand out: from a boat on Lake Naivasha, a corrugated iron pumphouse sits, a mechanical thrum more ominous than any House On The Left; in the chaos after a flower farm changes hands, rumours of changes to employee conditions bring riot police, and one approaches the camera - "[you are having] a negative impact on the company - stop this process now". Flowery language, unsettling politics.

The subject is powerful enough that van Zantvoort's work is almost invisible. He writes, directs, edits, and has constructed what amounts to a polemic. He just shows, again, and again, the impact of the trade. Occasionally title-cards are intercut, bearing facts. We move from person to person, their own tales unfolding piece by piece, varicoloured petals in a bouquet of despair. Roy Bemelman's music is well used, but in every other role it is van Zantvoort who makes the film. This is not an impartial eye, to be sure, nor omniscient.

At only 52 minutes there are questions that are not answered. The processes, the benefits, the justifications all intrigue. One expects in part but does not get confrontations with those responsible; no company men, nor earnest ministers. The closest to authority is the policeman with his stick. Perhaps they refrained from participating, perhaps they did not ask, but the questions remain. It is, in



A expose of the Kenya's flower industry and its cruel human toll.


[View the trailer](#)

Director: **Ton van Zantvoort**  
 Runtime: **52 minutes**  
 Year: **2009**  
 Country: **The Netherlands**  
 Festivals: **Thessaloniki**  
**Green Festival Seoul**  
**Newport International**  
**EIFF 2009**

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