

*TAKING ROOT: The Vision of Wangari Maathai*

## REVIEWS

★ **Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai.** DVD. 80 min./53 min. (closed captioned). Prod. by Marlboro Prods. Dist. by New Day Films. 2008, 2009 release. ISBN 978-1-57448-237-9. public libraries/high schools: \$89.

**Gr 9 Up**—Wangari Maathai won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for her efforts in establishing the Green Belt Movement, a grassroots undertaking that began with planting trees and expanded to a broader agenda including environmental protection, women's rights, and civic education. The film, focusing on Maathai's homeland of Kenya, elucidates the importance of the oral tradition in African history and the peoples' relationships to the environment, and it reviews the impact of colonialism, deforestation, and decades of dictatorial rule on the country. The women of the communities not only confronted environmental degradation, they became a political force that helped unseat the dictatorship. Beginning as a small endeavor, the Green Belt Movement has now planted more than 35 million trees and transformed the lives of countless people. Professor Maathai's personal story is inspiring, and she truly lives her mantra of empowering oneself and giving hope to others. Among the bonus features are interviews with Maathai and members of the Green Belt Movement.

**Planting Hope: Wangari Maathai & the Green Belt Movement.** DVD. 7 min. Prod. by Marlboro Prods. Dist. by takingrootfilm.com. 2009. \$10. (Gr 2 Up) *Planting Hope*, a seven-minute synopsis of Taking Root, could be shown to students in the third grade and above and could be used to generate discussion. Geography, environmental studies, history, and sociology classes can utilize this DVD to study and investigate a plethora of current issues.

*Patricia Ann Owens, Illinois Eastern Community Colleges, Mt. Carmel*

*School Library Journal, September 2010*

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August 03, 2010 (Web Review)

Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai \*\*\*1/2

(2008) 80 min. DVD: \$89: high schools & public libraries; \$285: colleges & universities. Marlboro Productions (dist. by New Day Films, tel: 888-367-9154, web: www.newday.com). PPR. Closed captioned. ISBN: 978-1-57448-237-9

Part of the acclaimed PBS-aired Independent Lens series, *Taking Root* tells the story of Wangari Maathai, the university professor and political activist who became a Nobel Peace Prize-winning leader of an ecological movement in Kenya. Maathai was born in a Kenyan village in 1940. By the time she reached adulthood, her once green and self-sustaining country had become dry, infertile, and impoverished, in part because tea and coffee plantations had replaced indigenous forests and small farms. To combat the environmental degradation, Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement, a grassroots effort that taught women how to plant trees. As documented by filmmakers Lisa Merton and Alan Dater, this seemingly simple undertaking eventually had widespread effects, including reforestation (millions of seedlings were planted), an improved rural economy, and greater self-sufficiency and empowerment for the women. Historic footage and photographs documenting some of the shameful aspects of Kenya's history as a British colony are interspersed with reporting on Maathai's struggles with the corrupt regime of President Daniel arap Moi. In 2002, a democratically elected government replaced Moi's, and Maathai was elected to

parliament with 98 percent of the vote; she also was named assistant minister of the environment and natural resources. Two years later, Maathai became the first African woman to win the prestigious peace award.

The uplifting narrative is nicely backed by gorgeous camerawork and an original soundtrack from African musician Samite. DVD extras include information on the Nobel Peace Prize, civic and environmental education workshops, and colonial history, as well as bonus interviews with Maathai.

Highly recommended.

Aud: C, P.

*F. Gardner for Video Librarian, August 2010*

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“The film exceeds even my high hopes. [*Taking Root*] is much more than a moving tribute to Wangari Maathai, although it certainly is that. It captures the transformative potential of “regular people” finding their voices. It proves that courage is contagious. It directly contradicts the current negative, disempowering images of Africa. It is about the deep change I know is essential to save our planet and is possible because I’ve had the profound privilege of seeing it. Now I am overjoyed because through this film millions more can see what I see. It will inspire untold, endless acts of courage.”

### **Frances Moore Lappé**

Author, *Getting A Grip: Clarity, Creativity, and Courage in a World Gone Mad*, and *Democracy’s Edge: Choosing to Save our Country by Bringing Democracy to Life*; Co-author, *Hope’s Edge: The Next Diet for a Small Planet*, 2002. [www.smallplanet.org](http://www.smallplanet.org)

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"*Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai* is an astounding film, capturing for years and populations to come the life and work of one of history's most extraordinary women, one in whose living presence we are blessed to share."

### **Thomas Berry**

Geologian and Cultural Historian, Author, *The Dream of the Earth*

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"Dr. Maathai's courage and vision are rivaled closely by her capacity to teach. Her story - as told in this film -- is worth a thousand textbooks."

### **Roger Wilkins**

Clarence J. Robinson Professor Emeritus, George Mason University

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"**Taking Root** is one of the most important documentaries of our times. In this critical era, may the work of Dr. Wangari Maathai serve as a powerful inspiration to all of us working to uplift our people and nurture life on the planet. May this beautiful film move us all to live as service warriors, as Dr. Maathai so humbly, yet fiercely demonstrates through the gift of her extraordinary life. Every seed planted offers hope, every plant watered brings life, and every tree celebrated is a gift to the generations to come."

### **Alli Chagi-Starr**

Green For All, Business Partnerships Manager & Co-Founder, Art in Action Youth Leadership Program

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“We have just completed the month-long book tour [**The Challenge for Africa**] and ... hardly was there a place we went that people did not mention *Taking Root*. It has been a wonderful project... I hope the film will continue to inspire people across the globe especially as the message is so fitting for our time.”

**Wangari Maathai**

Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Founder of the Green Belt Movement, and subject of *Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai*

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“*Taking Root* underscores the critical importance of education to a social movement. It portrays a vision of education that is not about changing people’s heads, but ultimately changing the conditions under which people live. We can talk in the classroom about education for social change, but this extraordinary film provides a model for change that engages and inspires. It is worth a hundred hours of classroom talk...both the film and the woman are truly extraordinary!

**Dr. Thomas Heaney,**

Adult & Continuing Education, National-Louis University

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“[*Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai*] portrays a woman’s fight against all odds not to be a victim in her own natural environment. Indeed, ‘the tree woman’ and her initiative of planting trees led to the emancipation of women in her community. Through this act, she became the epitome of success and a role model of an enriching woman.”

**Jury, International Images Film Festival for Women, Zimbabwe** upon presenting the Best Documentary Award

(The annual International Images Film Festival for Women (IIFF, held in Harare and Bulawayo from November to December in Zimbabwe, has been described as the most important film festival in Zimbabwe by the *Namibian Weekender* on January 23, 2009. IIFF is attended by delegates from all over the country, region and the continent as well as the ordinary Zimbabweans. The festival is celebrated under a woman-centric theme brought to life by a female protagonist in each film screened, which brings a new perspective to ordinary Zimbabweans thereby broadening their thoughts and horizons. More and more women from various walks of life are becoming more confident and believe in the shift from the bottom rung to the top of the ladder of success in their different spheres of life. Last year, more than 4000 individuals, both male and female, engaged with the women centered narratives presented by IIFF and as a result the lives, challenges and triumphs of women became unignorable [sic].)

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“Lisa Merton and Alan Dater’s documentary shows how one person can change the face of the Earth, giving environmentalism and activism a face other than Al Gore or Michael Moore. That person is Wangari Maathai, a native Kenyan who founded the Green Belt Movement in 1977 to inspire local women to replenish the once thriving forests surrounding their villages. Defying the forces of colonialism and the crown-backed Moi government, the U.S.-educated Maathai began teaching the people about their rights and spoke out against Kenya’s ruling dictatorship at enormous personal risk. From this affectionate, rousing portrait, the Nobel Prize winner emerges as a warm, humble, but unstoppable advocate for human rights—proof that one small voice of dissent can shake nations. It’s news we need to hear.”

**Brian Miles**

Nashville Scene, [www.nashvillescene.com](http://www.nashvillescene.com)

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“*Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai*” stood out for, among other things, its demonstration of the transformative impact that the weakest members of even poor societies can sometimes have, using the limited means at their disposal in creative and committed ways. All members of the jury welcomed and were inspired by this account of the true story of Kenyan environmentalist Wangari Maathai, who led an eventually successful struggle for, among other things, the rights of women in Africa led by African women themselves. Wangari Maathai said, ‘You raise your consciousness to a level where you know you must do the right thing.’ And so she did. She was elected to parliament and deservedly won the Nobel Peace Prize.”

**Coral Vinsen**

Convenor of the Human Rights Award jury at the 2008 Durban International Film Festival,  
Amnesty International Durban Executive member

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“Wangari Maathai is much more than the first African woman to receive the Noble Peace Prize. She is the embodiment and promise of the global environmental justice movement. *Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai* evokes images of majestic mountains, divine trees, Mau Mau ‘freedom army’ and Social Justice for Kenyan women. *Taking Root* demonstrates that the environmental movement is expanding in scope and vision. It is a social justice movement at its core. The infinite dimensions of the Green Belt Movement are seen through the lens of this film and its subject, a courageous woman fighting for a human cause.”

**Nehanda Imara**

Communities for a Better Environment

Merritt College, African American & Environmental Studies

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"At a time, when there is a dearth of optimism about the state of our planet, this upbeat documentary offers hope and light.

The film, which won the audience award at Hot Docs 2008, tells of the courage of Nobel Peace prize-winner Wangari Maathai and her part in the evolution of Kenya's environmental and socio-political landscape.

From humble beginnings, Maathai became a force for change in the Seventies by quietly educating and organizing groups of women in villages across Kenya to plant trees with her Green Belt Movement – trees that have now grown into tall forests. Maathai's spirited and peaceful defence of her ideals in subsequent decades, in spite of beatings, imprisonment, threats, and public ridicule by then director Moi, is an inspiration.

Longstanding docu team Alan Dater and Lisa Merton capture the warmth and gustiness of this amazing woman and show that, yes, apparently complex problems can often have simple solutions. Very refreshing, that."

**Rebort** on [www.iofilm.co.uk](http://www.iofilm.co.uk)

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## FILM

Posted: Wed., Oct. 29, 2008, 12:59pm PT

Hamptons

Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai

(Documentary)

A Marlboro production. Produced, directed by Lisa Merton, Alan Dater.

With: [Wangari Maathai](#), Lilian Wanjiru Njehu, Kamoji Wachiira, Veristine Mbaya, Ngorongo Makanga.

(English, Swahili dialogue)

The latest in a spate of films about strong African females and their impact on the political landscape, Lisa Merton and Alan Dater's Kenyan "Taking Root," like Ginny Reticker's "[Pray the Devil Back to Hell.](#)" attests to the seismic changes wrought by women of different religions and ethnicities working together. Docu bears witness as indomitable Nobel Peace Prize-winner Wangari Maathai reverses a century of ecological, cultural and social devastation by simply planting trees, giving grassroots activism new meaning. Lucid, lovingly crafted pic, which won the audience award at Hot Docs, has a shot at niche play before flourishing in ancillary.

Maathai -- a potent, holistic blend of folkloric lyricism and scientific cogency -- traces Africa's problems back to specific colonial practices (continued by corrupt post-colonial rulers) that systematically impoverished the continent. Graphic archival clips chronicle widespread deforestation to harvest timber, clear land for coffee and tea plantations, and finally, in a tidal wave of vegetative slaughter, to drive out the [Mau Mau](#), depicted here not as a bloodthirsty tribal menace but as an indigenous liberation army.

Deforestation leads to soil erosion and the drying up of rivers, while the scarcity of wood leads to the forsaking of traditional foodstuffs, which, in turn, leads to malnutrition, particularly given the colonial-enforced abandonment of subsistence farming for cash crops. This illustrated reading of Kenya's recent history is granted credibility by the speed with which Maathai's Green Belt Movement -- which encouraged the nation's women to plant millions of trees -- was able to turn around much of the ecological damage.

Additionally, Maathai's vast network of green is shown to be easily mobilized against government abuses. As seen in newsreel coverage of the Green Belt Movement's incursion into the political arena, via hunger strikes and protests by mothers of jailed political prisoners, the dissidents hold fast despite violent surges of repression. When President Moi, Kenya's longtime dictator, sought to destroy Nairobi's sole city park to build a luxury high-rise fronted by a giant statue of himself (filmmakers provide clips of a glistening mock-up), Maathai's letters to Western leaders induced them to withdraw financial support, weakening Moi's already tenuous hold on power.

Docu's inspirational focus precludes delving into many ongoing problems still plaguing the nation. Yet Maathai's vision of thousands of seedlings grown into new forests, and of vibrant, healthy people reconnected to their culture and their land, proves no utopian dream, as Merton and Dater's verdant footage amply illustrates.

Impressive tech credits present a startling contrast between stock footage of wasteful exploitation and the lyrical beauty of a flourishing ecosystem.

Camera (color, DV), Dater; editors, [Mary Lampson](#), Hom Haneke, [Jim Klein](#), Dater; music, Samite; sound, Tyler Gibbons, Eddah Kirhji, Gichuru Ngoima, Roshika Dater-Merton; sound designer, [Deborah Wallach](#). Reviewed at Hamptons Film Festival (Films of Conflict and Resolution), Oct. 17, 2008. (Also in Hot Docs, Toronto; Mill Valley Film Festival, Mill Valley, Calif.) Running time: 80 MIN.

**Ronnie Scheib**

*Variety*

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"...[Wangari Maathai's] personality fills the screen and easily holds the viewer's interest...Her struggles and eventual triumph are the heart of this film...It would be hard to imagine a more inspirational story..."

**William Morancy**

*The Montpelier Bridge*

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"['*Taking Root*' is] a wonderful film, which both informs and inspires in the best of ways. Given our programmers passionate response to the film, and to Wangari, we were quite confident that *Taking Root* would be beloved by the Hot Docs audience."

**Sean Farnell**

Director of Programming

Hot Doc International Film Festival

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**AUDIENCE COMMENTS**

"I saw it yesterday and I've already told eight people about it. Amazing what one person engaging others can do."

“...An amazing job of integrating the information on Kenyan history, the devastating impact of colonialism and the power of grassroots dedication.”

“...A simply astonishing film...a beautiful, moving, empowering and provocative work.”

“[*Taking Root*] kept a focus that informs and inspires...a good glimpse of a courageous woman who understands the nature of grassroots organizing.”