



Protecting Scarecrow
Video's African Film
Collection



Cypress Payne
cspayne@uw.edu

This project was organized and implemented by Cypress Payne. Cypress is a graduate student in the MLIS program, and is interested in metadata, cataloging, and collection development and management.

Sponsors



Jamie Han

Operations Manager at Scarecrow Video



Kate Barr

Executive Director of Scarecrow Video



Project Background

Scarecrow Video has one key value: that “all people, everywhere, should have the opportunity to access the film arts.” With the largest publicly available video collection in the US, Scarecrow Video is committed to caring for and preserving its collections in order to keep them accessible. As part of this commitment, rare and out-of-print titles may be labeled as Rental By Approval (RBA) and require a refundable deposit in order to rent. This designation keeps these hard to replace films publically available, while also protecting them.

Scarecrow’s large foreign film collection was identified as a high priority for RBA assessment, as many of these movies are not widely available to watch and replacements can be difficult to find.

Objectives

This project involved an audit of a portion of Scarecrow's African movies in their foreign section in order to determine which, if any, should be designated RBA. The project identified which of these films are rare, out-of-print, and difficult or impossible to replace through the development and application of assessment criteria in order to help conserve this collection so that people may continue to access and enjoy these films. Additional research was done to determine whether any of these films were orphaned, and thus eligible for digitization.



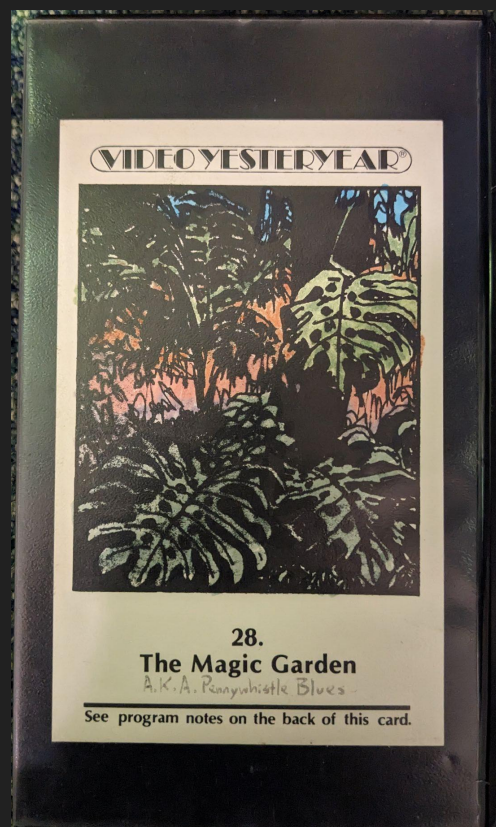
Researching African VHS Tapes

The initial focus of the project was on foreign VHS tapes, and I chose to start with the African country sections.

This consisted of 45 VHS tapes, only excluding those that were already marked as RBA in Scarecrow's system.

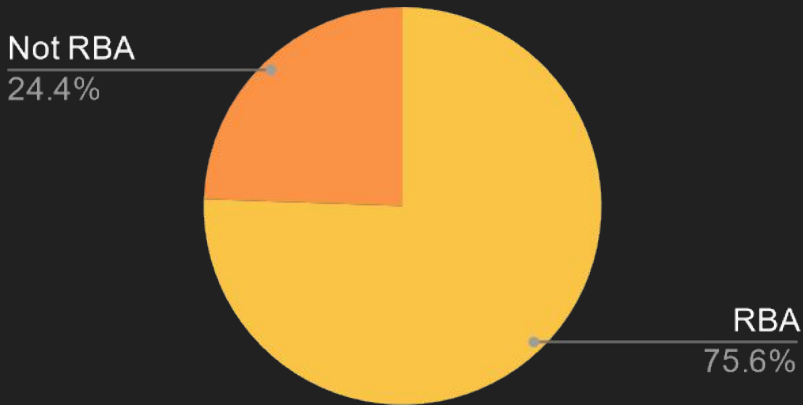
Through this initial audit, I identified what data was necessary to determine whether a film met the criteria for an RBA label.

Research involved recording production and distribution information from the movie's case, performing initial background research on the title, checking Amazon and Ebay to find the current price and availability, and determining whether a film was widely available through other institutions or had previously been digitized.



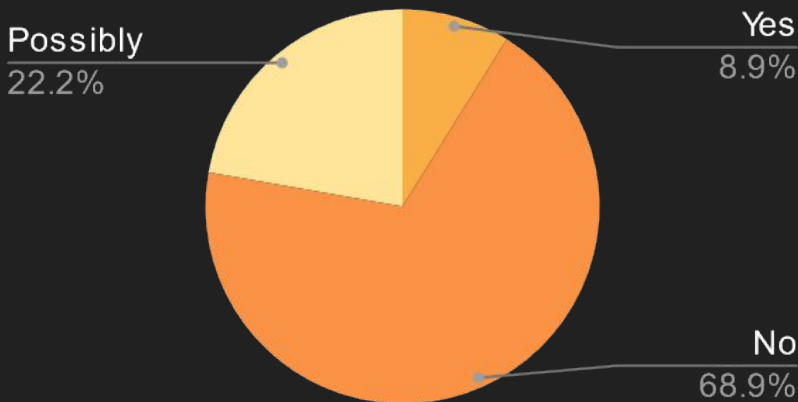
Scarecrow's copy of The Magic Garden (1951), the first film with an all-black cast shown in white cinemas in Johannesburg, South Africa

VHS



75.6% (34) of the African VHS tapes were recommended for RBA status, based on price and availability of any replacement. Only 11 tapes were widely available in good condition for under \$50.

VHS Digitization



Only 8.9% (4) were tagged as 'yes' for digitization. These films were public domain or clearly orphaned works. 22.2% were tagged 'possibly' as they were likely orphaned works with no copyright holders.

Oh Shucks...! Here Comes UNTAG (1990). The DVD copy held by the University of Cape Town was lost in a fire in 2021 that destroyed most of their African cinema collection. Scarecrow's may be the only publicly available copy of the film





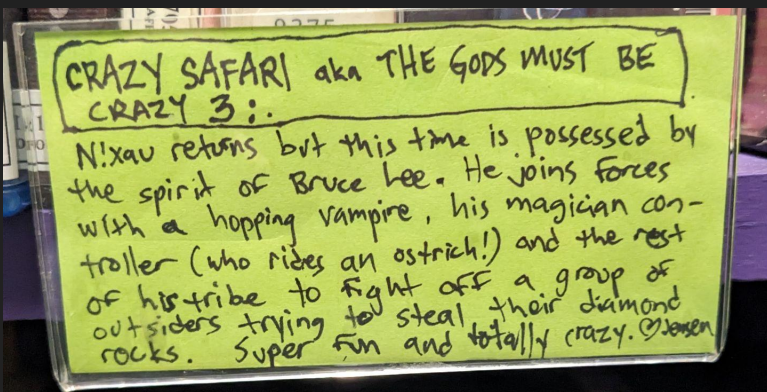
In 2023, Scarecrow launched their Rent by Mail program, allowing account holders to request and receive titles from their collection across the country by mail. While this greatly increased access to Scarecrow's massive movie collection, shipping these films out comes with the risk of loss or damage, so RBA movies are not included in this program.

VHS tapes are also excluded from being rented through the mail, but DVD, DVD-R, VCD, and Blu-ray discs get sent out across the country. This put a greater priority on auditing these formats to identify movies that are incredibly difficult or expensive to replace, or those that simply cannot be replaced. These movies become part of the RBA program and are only available to be rented directly from the store.

With a recent loss of multiple rare foreign films in the Rent by Mail program – both through damage and packages being misplaced during mailing, priorities shifted from analyzing VHS tapes to other formats.

Shifting Gears

Due to these new concerns, my project focus shifted from VHS tapes to disc formats after my initial audit of African VHS tapes. The original plan had been to expand the VHS audit to include additional continents and countries, but instead I expanded the audit to include all formats and stayed within the African country sections.



Crazy Safari (1991) is the unofficial sequel to The Gods Must Be Crazy and The Gods Must Be Crazy 2, and was never released in the US. The only copy available for purchase is a laserdisc on Ebay for \$84.99



Auditing African Films

Scarecrow's cataloging system showed 379 titles across 24 African countries in VCD, DVD, DVD-R, and Blu-ray formats.

I pulled a total of 126 movies from this selection to audit.

The goal of this audit was not only to analyze the collection on an item-by-item level for RBA status, but also to develop evaluation criteria and guidance for the rest of the collection.

30% of each country's movies were selected. Movies were prioritized by purchase date (purchased before 2014) and by most recent turn dates in an attempt to audit the films most at risk.

ALGERIA	3	MAURITANIA	2
ANGOLA	2	MOROCCO	3
BURKINA FASO	2	MOZAMBIQUE	1
CAMEROON	1	NIGERIA	38
CHAD	2	RWANDA	1
CONGO	1	SENEGAL	2
EGYPT	15	SOUTH AFRICA	20
ETHIOPIA	2	SUDAN	1
GHANA	15	TANZANIA	1
IVORY COAST	1	TUNISIA	6
KENYA	1	UGANDA	2
MALI	2	ZAMBIA	1

Number of films audited by country.

Evaluation Criteria

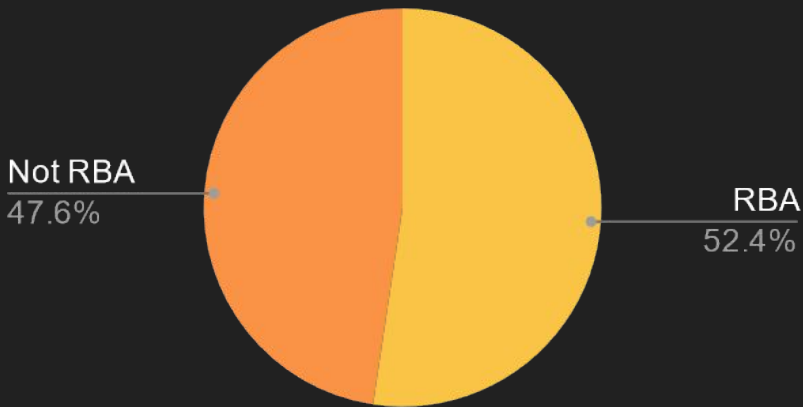
The primary considerations for whether a title should be Rental by Approval were purchase availability and fair market value (FMV). Items that could not be replaced, those that only had a few copies for sale, and those that would cost \$50 or more were recommended for RBA status.

Digitization recommendations involved more detailed research and took more time. This involved looking into what alternate formats were available, the current copyright status, and any previous preservation efforts from other institutions.



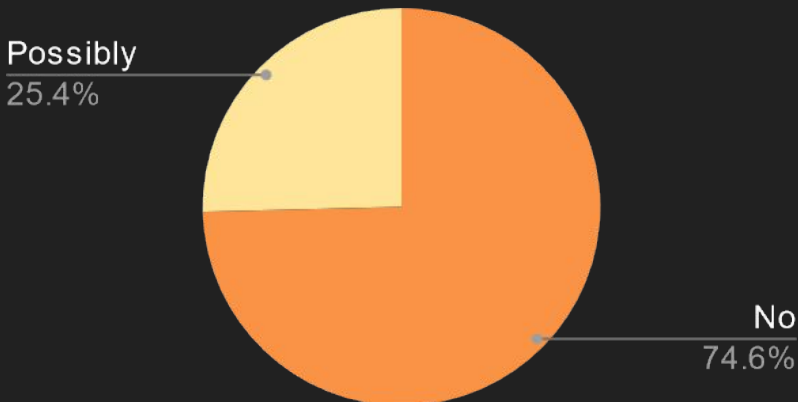
Challenges such as made-up barcode numbers and minimal to no online presence of distributors made research more challenging. This invalid UPC “P RIHANNA 005” comes from the case for the Nollywood film Princess Rihanna Part 1 & 2

Rent By Mail



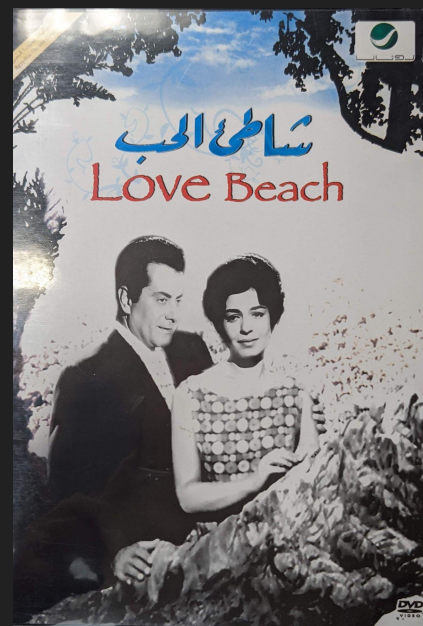
52.4% (66) of the audited discs were recommended for Rental by Approval. These films will be labelled as RBA and excluded from the Rent by Mail program.

Rent by Mail Digitization



Only 25.4% (32) were highlighted as possibly digitizable. Determining whether a work is orphaned is much more challenging when copyright holders may vary by country.

Variations in the romanization and translations of movie titles can make them difficult to find online. A record from OSU identifies Love Beach (1961) as Shāṭī' al-ḥubb, while IMDB romanizes it as Shatie el hub.



This project not only produced an itemized list of films to be included in the RBA program and a list of films to potentially qualify for digitization, but I also developed assessment criteria for determining RBA and digitization status, gathered useful sources of information, collated data about distributors and producers, and created recommendations based on trends observed within the collection.



Scarecrow Video's Nigerian movie section, which contains 126 different films

This data will inform future work and assessment of the collection by Scarecrow's staff and volunteers and aid in the care and preservation of the African film collection at Scarecrow Video.