



MOSTRA INTERNAZIONALE
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LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA
Official Selection

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SAINT OMER

A FILM BY ALICE DIOP



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2022 Official Selection

KAYIJE KAGAME GUSLAGIE MALANDA VALÉRIE DRÉVILLE AURÉLIA PETIT
XAVIER MALLY ROBERT CANTARELLA SALIMATA KAMATE THOMAS DE POURQUERY

SAINT OMER

A FILM BY
ALICE DIOP

122' • FRANCE • 2022 • 1.85 • 5.1

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Saint Omer court of law. Young novelist Rama attends the trial of Laurence Coly, a young woman accused of killing her 15-month-old daughter by abandoning her to the rising tide on a beach in northern France. But as the trial continues, the words of the accused and witness testimonies will shake Rama's convictions and call into question our own judgement.



SAINT OMER INTERVIEW WITH ALICE DIOP

.....
/ From what feelings was your film born?

All my films are always born out of a feeling, an intuition, which grows and grows to become so compelling an obsession that the film is born. I never say to myself "Hey, this subject is interesting." It always comes from something that hits an intimate story, sometimes something that has been untold for a long time. For Saint Omer the obsession comes from a photo published in Le Monde in 2015. It's a black and white image, taken by a surveillance camera: a black woman, at Gare du Nord, pushes a pram with a mixed-race baby all wrapped up. I looked at that photo and thought "She's Senegalese!" Two days before, a baby had been found in Berck-sur-Mer, carried by the waves, at six in the morning. No one knew who this child was, journalists and investigators thought perhaps a migrant boat that had drifted off course. Investigators had found a stroller in a thicket in Berck-sur-Mer, and from there, by studying surveillance camera footage, had traced it back to this black woman with the mixed-race baby. I look at her, I know she's Senegalese, I know we're the same age, I know her so well that I recognise myself. And so begins an obsession with this woman. I don't tell anyone, but I follow the investigation almost hour by hour, since all the papers are talking about this baby. A few days later, we learn that she is indeed a Senegalese woman, Fabienne Kabou, and she has killed her baby by leaving it at high tide on the beach. She has confessed; I listen to her barrister, and immediately the question of witchcraft is mentioned. I learn that she is a PhD student, an intellectual, the first

comments from the press highlight her exceptional IQ of 150, yet she said her aunts in Senegal cast a spell on her, which would explain what she's done... For me, something doesn't gel. At the same time, I wonder why everyone is making such a big deal out of the fact that she is extremely well-spoken, she's an academic after all... From the first attempts at constructing her story, I can hear an entire familiar mechanism, a sum of journalistic projections on this woman. The trial took place in 2016 and I decided to go. I didn't tell anyone about it. I don't know how to describe this crazy act of going to the trial of a woman who has killed her 15-month-old mixed-race baby, when I myself am the young mother of a mixed-race child. But I talk to my producers who feel there's a film trying to find itself. I land in Saint-Omer, an absolutely devastated northern town where only the Marine Le Pen campaign posters haven't been ripped down. Like the character of Rama at the beginning of the film, I walk through the city from the train station to the hotel. I feel people looking at me, people stare at me from their windows, people in the street turn away, my luggage makes such a loud noise on the cobblestones. I feel unsafe, because seeing what kind of white people are looking at me, I understand I am the mirror of their downgrading. I'm a black woman, dressed like a Parisian, dragging a chic suitcase, and I'm here in this depressed town, exposed to these downgraded white people... This image which could have been of a thriller, or horror movie, is in this film. In any case, I worked from this first sensation. In the hotel room I start to think about this woman, and I feel the



presence of Fabienne Kabou haunting the room. I am facing my limit, a part of myself that scares me: my unspeakable obsession with this story...What also made this film very concrete was that I was obsessed by documenting ritual of justice. On the final day of the trial, I realised that this little girl had been named. More than named, her complaint had been filed somewhere, she had been seen...

/ She was born again because before, she was in limbo?

Her birth is an act of justice. An act of justice was served on everything she went through, on her entire life, not just on the murder committed by her mother. Justice was done for her. That is something that really moved me. I saw myself as a little girl for whom justice could be done, for my whole life and for the story of my mother. That day, when the barrister talked about the real dream Fabienne Kabou had had, with the little girl who places herself inside her barrister's gown, she said she had understood that Fabienne Kabou was asking her to carry not only her voice but also the voice of her baby daughter. I broke down in tears. A journalist who had been following the trial from the beginning and was six months pregnant was crying too, beside me... That's when I knew I was going to make this film, which would be for all of us, for all the little girls we have been, an act of justice. That's how I imagined the story of the pregnant woman attending the trial. The whole film was

born at that time, in the confrontation of the two women's tears, a black woman and a white woman, each of us crying for something different yet also for something in common.

/ The title of your previous film, We, also refers to this question of the universal.

Yes, and basically this is the question in all my films: to offer the black body the possibility of saying the universal. I've always intuitively thought this was the case, but politically, it seems to me, it's not yet accepted. Our intimacy is not quite yet considered as being able to speak to the intimacy of the other. I have the feeling that this dialogue is not yet envisaged. The exchange is only too rarely done in that direction. But I have always recognised myself in white women and white men, I cried over Anna Karenina, and Madame Bovary, "it's me" too. The first film that convinced me of what I have always known, namely that the black body could convey the universal, was 35 Shots of Rum by Claire Denis. Suddenly, I saw black actors affected by issues that had nothing to do with their colour, without that being the question, and it really shook me.

/ What were you risking, on an existential level, making this film?

I went about it reluctantly. This film is very organic, very intimate in many places, even if I put lots of energy into claiming the opposite; namely that Rama is not me, which is true, in part, but like

any fiction, it is nourished by things that belong to me, to my experience, to emotions I have known. Now that the film is completed, I'm more relaxed with the idea of owning it and I consider that it was necessary for me to make it, for both personal and political reasons. In my need to tell the story of these women, there was a desire to inscribe their silence, to repair their invisibility. It's also one of the political aims of the film. And to talk about what mothers we are made from, what baggage, what heritage, what pains...From what silence, from the void of exile, their exile, the void of our mothers' lives, the nothingness of their tears, the nothingness of their violence, we tried to compose our own lives. It tries to answer questions with which all women are confronted, while simultaneously speaking specifically about one of the aspects of the history of immigration. How we, black French women have become mothers through these mothers.

/ How did you conceive this story from an aesthetic point of view?

The narrative is to record this skin, these bodies,

in a place where they are still barely visible. That's what's contemporary: moving from off-screen to the centre of the image, but with an aesthetic power. The aesthetic of the film is political to me. These bodies haven't been filmed much, these women rarely seen, I want to offer them cinema as a space where we can no longer escape their gaze, without it being too stylised. The first references I sent to Claire Mathon, the film's DP, were paintings. I think we were revolving around the idea of inscribing the pictoriality of these bodies in the history of cinema. La Belle Ferronière by Leonardo Da Vinci was one, some Rembrandts, black models painted by Cézanne, and one that struck me at the MET, Grape Wine by Andrew Wyeth, the portrait of a black vagabond, painted as Titian might have done.

/ You were talking about justice, and about the barrister who wants to do justice to this child. Don't you think there is a connection between justice and the aesthetic question of correctness?

Absolutely! Because correctness, like justice,



renders us complex. I couldn't stand the way much of the media talked about Fabienne Kabou; I sensed a desire to turn her into a victim figure, to give her act a simplistic, almost folkloric explanation – witchcraft – which diminished all her violence, all her fire, all her rage, all her revolt, all her ugliness. For me she is a powerful Medea, not the poor trampled immigrant. That narrative doesn't restore her power, including that which is more shadowy, dark, violent, and which I don't judge, but which I wanted to give back to her. To me, correctness and justice is to give her back – and give us back – our complexity. I've rarely seen the complexity of a black woman filmed, written or recounted. We are always smoothed over in a right-thinking way, locked into the eyes of those who have the right to make our own story for us.

/ Why is this white gaze unable to see this complexity?

Sometimes, I felt that Fabienne Kabou's complexity wasn't seen, that she was often locked into stereotypes, many mocked her so-called way of speaking French. I couldn't help but see a form of unthinking racism in this obsession with constantly qualifying her. This is significant, because my own ability to articulate my thoughts has very often triggered the same admiring astonishment, and since forever this astonishment says a lot about the person who makes the remark. If I am told about a black PhD student working on Wittgenstein, it doesn't surprise me that she is very articulate. Yet at the same time, I realise that a black woman like Fabienne Kabou has barely been listened to, is not visible enough, is not enough in dialogue with those for whom a black woman, in their experience, is above all a housekeeper, who speaks little, whom they pass by or live beside without really seeing. I spend my life interacting with women like Fabienne Kabou, they are my university friends and teachers, journalists, etc... Kabou's language does not impress me. On the other hand, I can see how



she performs it, precisely so as to not stick to this image of the "black" woman as she imagines she is looked at.

/ Does she whiten her language?

She uses it as a weapon against others and, deep down, against herself. I've never heard anyone talk like her! The documentary material of the film is this language, the language of Fabienne Kabou. Sometimes I couldn't understand what she was saying myself: "I was in a sclerosing and anaesthetising matrix".. I had no idea what that meant! Fabienne Kabou had a rapturous relationship with language and a need to be listened to, to be seen, to make through this language her

own account of herself which contradicted what could have been said about her, and to resist her. Moreover, I must admit that Guslagie Malanda's portrayal of Fabienne Kabou is much more human. The real Fabienne Kabou was a frozen statue who enjoyed the effect produced by the way she spoke. I arrived at the trial thinking I was going to find a heartrending Medea, and here's a woman without any remorse, with zero affect, extremely cold... I felt this was a psychopath before me! Suddenly my mythological reading of her act – "sublime, forcément sublime" ("Sublime, necessarily sublime"), to quote Duras – collapses. Because the fantasy of recognition gives way before the monster, I can no longer see myself in her, no longer think of

myself through her, who doesn't give me access to her humanity. So I ask myself what I'm doing there, why this long road, why did I project myself into her? I must admit that I also went to the trial fantasizing about the lyrical aspect of her act. I'd read an article in *Le Monde* by Pascale Robert Diard in which she had written "she placed her daughter on the beach", so for me she had metaphorically returned her to the Sea, offered her to a more welcoming "mother"; in fact she drowned her! That is the implacability of fact; but this attraction to this almost romantic gesture, in my eyes, has unconsciously helped me hide the personal, unspeakable obsession that binds me to this tragic story. Paradoxically, it's the confrontation between this primary lyrical reading and the documentary reality of the actual trial that helped me think about my mise-en-scene and my point of view on this story. In my film, the mise-en-scene replaces the lyrical dimension, allowing us to access the story, cleanse it from its sordid, unlistenable, unthinkable nature, it's the mise-en-scene that allows to look into the pit of this story and to draw from it a greater knowledge, a greater understanding of ourselves, to forgive her, to forgive all mothers, all our mothers. It's the story of Rama that makes this possible, in the identification it allows the viewer. Without her, this fictional character, it would have been nothing more than the story of a banal and tragic news item, and the film would be no better than a cinematic version of the French TV show *Bring in the Accused*.

/ Did you think about the 'courtroom drama' genre?

Yes, a little, Clouzot's *The Truth*, of course. The character played by Bardot helped me create this Laurence Coly, who exists between Fabienne Kabou and the actress Guslagie Malanda. My references were also literary: Andre Gide's *Recollections of the Assize Court*, *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote, *The Adversary* by Emmanuel Carrère. What I found interesting in this non-fiction literature is that it

goes beyond the literality of the news item. In Saint Omer the news story is consumed, digested, spat out through the prism of my personal story and this political project that consists of connecting the stories of the women to the mythology that has never been offered to them, to the tragedy that comes to reveal something of ourselves, of me, of the viewer. Of course, all this comes from a true story, from documentary material, but fiction allows us to make something out of it that is no longer about the story of one woman, but about the history of us all. This lay at the heart of my discussions with both my co-writers, Amrita David, who has also edited all my films, and Marie Ndiaye. Amrita and I started to put something together on paper, the minutes of the trial, and it's from this first draft that we asked Marie to accompany us in the construction of a fiction woven around this material.

/ In terms of mise-en-scene, do you see a boundary between fiction and documentary?

All my films exist at the frontier where the two

meet. I tried to perform a relationship to the truth of the documentary, not only by taking the text of the trial but also through the mise-en-scene. I have re-created a trial, not in the actual court room but in the one next door, which became a film set. I turned it into a room with wood panelling that said something political: this black woman judged in a provincial town, but which symbolically embodies the splendours of the Republic. To place this woman in a fake film set, with fake wood panels, inside the real tribunal, was a way of creating a pictorial and political frame. The spectators were real spectators from the town, the actors played a documentary text, in a replayed documentary reality, there was no "Action!"; no "Cut!". We shot in chronological order, which means the actors relived the trial. So, it's a combination of something extremely stylised – the sets – extremely staged – the temporality of the shots – with something totally documentary-like: the way it is filmed, and to urge the actors to summon an absolutely documentary emotion. I gave them very few acting suggestions:



Photo © LAURENT LE CRABE

I confronted them with the text and suggested going through it, to act in the truth of the moment. I chose mostly stage actors, like Valérie Dréville, who plays the presiding judge. The relationship with the present moment is very important in the film, and essentially very theatrical. There was a beautiful moment during filming. Valérie Dréville stopped in mid-take, overwhelmed by the text, and began to cry. She apologised for that. I had seen, when she was playing it, that this text, which she knew to be documentary, told at that precise moment, struck something in her, the actress as much as the mother and daughter she also is. I told her that this unforeseen, uncontrolled emotion belonged to the film. This was the actors' direction, what I expected from each of them - that they perform with their own subterranean history.

/ What changes did you make to the text of the trial?

The passage on the chimeras during the plea acted by Aurélia Petit. Obviously for all the dialogues, everything was reassembled, reworked, but everything is true. On set, I didn't say "Action!". I couldn't stand the fact that there was "cinema" in front of me. Because for me, in fiction cinema, you build one shot after another. What interests me is what is in between two shots. I didn't really care about what was planned! This can be quite problematic in relation to the mechanism within which fiction is usually made. I shot what was in front

of me, live. I invented a mechanism within which reality and fiction mixed, without me necessarily being able or wanting to control it. It was lucky to have been able to make this film with Claire, because her work shows how receptive she was to this way of doing things. We entered the shots in a very slow shift from reality to fiction. We didn't always warn the extras, or the actors, we started shooting and suddenly reality was thickened by a particular intensity, the actresses entered very naturally in the text, into their roles. I didn't cut up the shots much. We filmed the way the actresses let themselves be overtaken by what was happening, by the text. I didn't direct Guslagie. I let her enter the state of possession that she never left. For a whole month, she never got out of the character of Laurence Coly, which she totally re-interpreted. When Amrita got the rushes, she could see that the Laurence Coly played by Guslagie wasn't the one we had written. And it didn't matter! The only thing I did was to offer her a safe space where she could summon her ghosts. Same for Kayije, for the scene where Rama cries in her hotel room, I sat down facing Kayije and started to touch my belly, so she too started to touch her belly, and she became me! She acted a scene I had lived while pregnant but which I hadn't told her about. It was insane. We were both in some kind of trance. This shoot was an experience we lived collectively, like a charm. ■

By Hélène Frappat



CAST

Rama - **Kayije KAGAME** · Laurence Coly - **Guslagie MALANDA** · The Judge - **Valérie DRÉVILLE** · Ms. Vaudenay (Laurence Coly's lawyer) - **Aurélia PETIT** · Luc Dumontet - **Xavier MALY** · General Counsel / Advocate-General - **Robert CANTARELLA** · Odile Diatta - **Salimata KAMATE** · Adrien - **Thomas DE POURQUERY**

CREW

Director **Alice DIOP** · Written by **Alice DIOP, Amrita DAVID, Marie NDIAYE**
Photography **Claire MATHON (A.F.C)** · Editor **Amrita DAVID** · Sound
Dana FARZANEHPOUR, Josefina RODRIGUEZ, Lucile DEMARQUET, Emmanuel CROSET · Encounter's 1st Assistant **Barbara CANALE** · Script
Mathilde PROFIT · Casting **Stéphane BATUT** · Set designer **Anna LE MOUEL** · Costume Designer **Annie MELZA TIBURCE** · Make-up & Hair
Élodie Namani CYRILLE, Marie GOETGHELUCK · Production Managers
Rym HACHIMI, Paul SERGENT · Post-production **Bénédicte POLLET**
Producers **SRAB FILMS - Toufik AYADI, Christophe BARRAL** · Co-producers
ARTE FRANCE CINÉMA, PICTANOVO HAUTS-DE-FRANCE
Broadcasters **ARTE FRANCE, CANAL+, CINÉ+** · In partnership with
CENTRE NATIONAL DU CINÉMA ET DE L'IMAGE ANIMÉE, FONDS IMAGES DE LA DIVERSITÉ - L'AGENCE NATIONALE DE LA COHÉSION DES TERRITOIRES, RÉGION ÎLE-DE-FRANCE, PICTANOVO, LA RÉGION HAUTS-DE-FRANCE, COFINOVA 18, INDÉFILMS 10, RÉGION NOUVELLE AQUITAINE, CICLIC-RÉGION CENTRE-VAL DE LOIRE · French Distribution **LES FILMS DU LOSANGE** · International Sales **WILD BUNCH INTERNATIONAL**



KAYIJE KAGAME

Kayije Kagame was born in 1987 in Geneva. She studied at ENSATT in Lyon (*École Nationale Supérieure des Arts et Techniques du Théâtre*) where she was spotted by Bob Wilson and took part in the Watermill International Summer Program Residency in Long Island, USA. The creator of numerous performances, sound pieces, films and installation, she is currently preparing for her next stage and cinematographic project, **INTÉRIEUR VIE / INTÉRIEUR NUIT (INNER LIFE / INNER NIGHT)**, to be co-directed with Hugo Radi.

SAINT OMER marks her feature film debut. ■



GUSLAGIE MALANDA

Born in 1990, Guslagie Malanda made her feature film debut in the lead role in **MY FRIEND VICTORIA** by Jean-Paul Civeyrac in 2014, alongside Pascal Greggory.

She holds a degree in Art History and has worked widely as an independent curator. ■



ALICE DIOP

French screenwriter and director Alice Diop was born 1979.

After studying history and visual sociology at the Sorbonne, she began her career as a documentary filmmaker. Her short and medium length films selected and awarded prizes in several festivals, include **LES SÉNÉGALAISES ET LA SÉNÉGAULOISE** (2007), **LA MORT DE DANTON** (2011), **LA PERMANENCE** (2016) and **TOWARDS TENDERNESS** (2016), which won with the César for Best Short Film in 2017.

Her feature length documentary **WE** (2021) won the Best Documentary Award as well as Best Film in the Encounters section at the Berlin Film Festival in 2021.

SAINT OMER is Alice Diop's fiction feature film debut. ■

FEATURE FILMS

2022 • **Saint Omer** - Fiction, 122'

Co-written with Amrita David and Marie NDiaye

2022 • **WE** - Documentary, 115'

Best Documentary Award - Berlinale 2021

Best Film in the Encounters section - Berlinale 2021

2016 • **LA PERMANENCE** - Documentary, 97'

Competition Prize, Cinema du réel 2016

Festivals: Karlovy Vary (Czech Republic), BFI London (UK), Viennale (Austria), IDFA (The Netherlands)

SHORT AND MEDIUM-LENGTH FILMS

2016 • **TOWARDS TENDERNESS** - Documentary, 39'

César for Best Short Films 2017

2011 • **LA MORT DE DANTON** - Documentary, 64'

2007 • **LES SÉNÉGALAISES ET LA SÉNÉGAULOISE** - Documentary, 56'

2006 • **CLICHY POUR L'EXEMPLE** - Documentary, 50'

2005 • **LA TOUR DU MONDE** - Documentary, 50'

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