



62^e SEMAINE
DE LA CRITIQUE
CANNES 2023
OPENING FILM

à ma GLORIA

by Marie Amachoukeli

LILIES FILMS PRESENTS



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CANNES 2023
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à ma GLORIA

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RENDEZ-VOUS

Viviana Andriani

viviana@rv-press.com

06 80 16 81 39

Aurélie Dard

aurelie@rv-press.com

06 77 04 52 20

▷ INTERNATIONAL SALES

PYRAMIDE INTERNATIONAL

32 rue de l'échiquier

75010, Paris

01 42 96 01 01

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Six year old Cléo loves her nanny Gloria more than anything. When Gloria must suddenly return to Cape Verde to care for her own children, Cléo makes her promise that they will see each other very soon. Gloria invites Cléo to her island and the two must make the most of their last summer together.

Interview with MARIE AMACHOUKELI

Interview by Baptiste Etchegaray, March 2023

The film is dedicated to Laurinda Correia, who is she?

Laurinda is the woman who took care of me when I was little, she worked as a caretaker in the apartment building where I lived. She was a Portuguese immigrant, and I spent most of my childhood in her lodge with her children. When I was six, she told me that she was going back to her homeland with her husband to open a business and start a new life near her family. It was the first major shock in my life. Today, we are still in touch, we send each other postcards, she calls me on my birthday, and when I visit her in Portugal, there are pictures of me among those of her children and grandchildren. She still calls me "my daughter". With this film, I wanted to talk about the people who take care of children for a living, and about how the emotional bond sometimes exceeds the predefined limits of their work. In our society, where motherhood is sanctified, I think that it is taboo to say that not only parents can be bursting with love for their children, or that, conversely, a child can feel that absolute love for a person who is not a parent. You don't even tell your own family. It is a secret, almost clandestine, unspoken kind of

love. And it is precisely because it is secret that I wanted to talk about it.

The story is told from the perspective of a little girl who is barely six years old...

Yes, it was crucial to me. I wondered a lot about the perspective before, after and during the shooting and editing process. The point of view is that of a child, the film is not a documentary. What mattered to me was to work on what is happening off camera. The idea was to focus the child's viewpoint on what she feels and to reframe the whole film through that prism. So, in the film, what we get to see about Cape Verde is mostly what we imagine it to be like, that off-camera reality. That way, I avoided the picture-postcard, or the supposedly realistic approach; I let sensations and feelings take precedence.

The little girl's look is special because she wears glasses, it is even the first thing we find out about her. Why?

I am blind as a bat, which probably produces a particular way to depict the world, especially in films. When you are short-sighted, you grasp rea-



lity less through vision than through movement, hearing, kinesthetics... I wanted the girl to perceive the world like that, in a multiple and sensory way. It also shaped my directing. She listens a lot, many shots focus on her hear, she also touches materials and objects. Louise, who plays Cléo, isn't short-sighted, it was an act. She was so proud to wear glasses, she took care of them as if they were her most prized possession. As soon as she put them on, she was in character. She became Cléo.

How did you choose Louise?

We did not want a child from the regular casting circuit. I wanted a first-timer, so that is what we searched for. Our casting director noticed Louise in a park; she liked that she was bossing her little brother around. You could tell she had a strong personality. She came to audition and I immediately felt something quite rare in children of her age – a faculty to listen and to put herself in someone else's shoes. She was empathetic, in a way. Also, she looked extremely "normal," she wasn't too cute nor too wild. Then Ilça and Louise met, and their screen tests convinced us that they were the right fit for our project.

The film deals with two emancipations: that of a woman who goes back to her homeland to become independent and no longer be anybody else's employee, and that of a child who learns how to grow up and make her own way in life. We follow their journeys towards independence, but

that independence comes at a price, and that is the love they share.

The role of the nanny, of the babysitter has been explored in films, but in very different genres. Why did you want to tell the story of this character?

I found it incredible to think that every day, all around the world, there are women who raise children who are not their own. Those women are part of the daily lives of millions of families, yet it seems that we do not want to look at them - or only from afar - let alone question our relationships with them. They are sometimes referred to by their function, "nannies" at best, but there is obviously more to it than a mere function.

When I was writing the film, an American woman told me: "It's a nanny movie!" It is an actual film genre in the United States, but mostly comedies, like *Who's the Boss?* or *Mrs. Doubtfire*... And of course, *Mary Poppins*, who was a favourite of mine when I was a child. It is even THE reference in my film, with its idea to mix fiction and animation. Every time I watch it, I find it awesome, not only because of the quality of the acting, the singing, and the dancing, but because it is the story of a nanny who just shows up and develops a really strong bond with the children while their parents are busy elsewhere. *Mary Poppins* is full of tenderness for those two children, and so are they, yet conventions prevent them from saying



so. The whole film exudes love, but it is never said or expressed. It is kind of cryptic, in a way.

Did you want to make a “nanny movie” that was not a comedy?

The dramatic core of the film is an impossible, secret and taboo kind of love, therefore it is melodramatic. With a series of violent swings between moments of pure bliss and moments of absolute gloom. So yes, I was aiming at melodrama. Because I also love Todd Haynes' *Far from Heaven* or Douglas Sirk's films, which I used to watch with my grandmother, with tears in my eyes and tissues in my pockets.

You add another taboo to the “mother-daughter” relationship: the North-South relationship.

Gloria is what they call an economic migrant: she came to France to work and provide for her family. It is the taboo of an unbalanced relationship, of the heritage of colonialism, with a continent ruling over another. Incidentally, I wanted to show that it is also a matter of money, rather than hide it under the table because we are dealing with love. I ask the question several times in the film. When you pay for love, is it real love? Is it just a job or a heartfelt calling?

The situation is also unfair to Gloria's children who have stayed in Cape Verde. This is a widespread phenomenon: children growing up without their

mother because she had to move to provide for them. What challenges does it pose, here and there? Why is it so seldomly talked about, even though it is so common? What it is we do not want to see?

Did you make a lot of background research to feed your script?

While I was writing the script, I read anthropologist Rita Laura Segato's essay *Black Oedipus*, and the cover really stroke me. It was a painting by Jean-Baptiste Debret from the 19th century, showing a black woman proudly holding a white child, and cradling him protectively. As I read the essay, I discovered that the painting used to be called *Don Pedro II in his nanny's bosom*. Then it was renamed *Don Pedro and his nanny*, and after WWII, it became *A Servant Carrying a Child*. Over the years, the nanny's pivotal role was reduced to the status of a servant. It was as if an emperor simply could not have a black woman as a governess, because her background was a reminder of a colonial past.

I was also struck by thought-provoking photos from the late 19th and early 20th centuries that were shared on the internet. They show white wealthy American babies posing for photographers. The women holding them remain mysteriously hidden behind black veils, with only a gloved hand standing out. Whose hand is it, who is behind the veil? In fact, those women are the



children's black nannies, who were deliberately hidden behind sheets so that they would not appear on the pictures. They were the only ones who could keep the children quiet during the photography sessions. Their mothers could not, because the babies did not know them well enough. Yet, the nannies were erased because it was not acceptable. A black childminder could not carry out maternal or educational tasks. My film stems from the will to lift that veil.

Your meeting with Ilça Moreno, the Cape Verdean woman who plays Gloria, was decisive, wasn't it?

I met many nannies, from several generations. They told me their stories. Then I met Ilça Moreno through our casting director, who had found her brilliant when they met and she made a first screen test. Ilça has a lot in common with Gloria. Her journey is quite similar to that of the character, unless it is the other way around. She used to work as a nurse in Cape Verde. When she came to France, she looked after children, especially a boy with a disability – she lived with him for two years and they were really close. She discreetly told me about part of her life, about her village and the three children she had to leave with her mother. Meeting her allowed me to enrich the script, and to make it reflect the reality of her country. Ilça had done a little bit of theatre in Cape Verde, she is funny and she has a natural talent. She also has a taste for adventure, and she loved the idea of

going back to Cape Verde to shoot a film. So we decided to embark on this exciting adventure together.

When we first went to Cape Verde for location scouting with Bénédicte Couvreur, my producer, we discovered that everyone we met had a story like that of Gloria and her children. Including Gomes Tavares, who plays César in the film – his mother lives in France and he has never met her. And Abnara Gomes Varela who plays Fernanda... Many children are raised by a grandmother, an aunt, an uncle...

The Cape Verdean part of the film was shot in Tarrafal, in the north of Santiago, the largest island of the archipelago.

It is a volcanic territory. Just like childhood, actually. I think childhood is not a quiet territory at all. It is volcanic and overflowing – either in your relationships, your imagination, or your perception of the world, everything becomes an adventure of epic proportions. It was a major challenge for me as a director. I wanted to make a sensory film, in which every detail lingers with you forever, as if it were branded on your soul.

This part of the film is in Creole, not in Portuguese.

Even though Portuguese is the official language in Cape Verde, I wanted the film to be shot in the language that is spoken by most of the population. Creole is the language of slaves, they don't teach



it in schools, and it has been a taboo of sorts since the colonial period. I took Creole lessons with Arlindo Semedo Varela, a worker in France who likes to pass on his native tongue. He has been an amazing, very patient teacher. He used Cape Verdean songs to introduce me to the basics of Creole vocabulary and to the richness of Creole poetry.

I feel really strongly about this. My father is from Georgia, and under the Soviet Union he was forced to speak Russian, even though his native tongue was Georgian. Keeping their language alive was like a counter power against imperialism back then. Besides, I have studied in Catalonia, I realised the importance of Catalan, and I admire people who fight for their own language. It has nothing to do with nationalism, contrary to what people think sometimes in France.

And above all, I like the idea that I don't understand everything that I am told, but I can feel what it is about, just like we can appreciate nuances in a piece of music even though we don't read music. Cléo also feels that way – sometimes, when people are speaking Creole, she doesn't need subtitles to understand that the discussion is about a sentimental matter, or what the stakes are. It is a difficult thing to show in a film, it makes you wonder what should or should not be translated, but it was really important to me.

The first part of the film takes place in the Paris region, another part takes place in Cape Verde, and a third part in-between is animated. What did animation show that live action could not?

To me, animation provides the most direct access to the inner world of the child, to what Cléo feels but cannot express for lack of words. When you are a kid, you hear snatches of stories told by adults that you don't understand, because they don't bother explaining to you, or because they think they should shield you, or because it is in a foreign language... So you create incredible worlds for yourself. I wanted to use animation to show how Cléo pictures Gloria's departure to France. I have heard exile stories in my family, many fantastic, improbable stories, but I wasn't told everything, because the politic contexts were complicated, so I fantasized, I made up my own images.

Besides, I had already co-directed an animated short film, *I Want Pluto to Be a Planet Again*, with Vladimir Mavounia-Kouka. I like the creative process of animation. I am passionate about the rhythms of workshops... The sense of time is different from that of cinema. I grew up in the workshop of my father, who was a silversmith, near the forge, surrounded by an anvil and hundreds of tools. I find this rhythm comforting. To me, this is home.

For *Àma Gloria*, I asked my friend Pierre-Emmanuel Lyet, who is a writer and illustrator of children's books, to co-direct with me the animated part and to oversee graphic research and design. We



used the work of amazing colourists Peter Doig and Félix Vallotton as references. Doig, because of the mystery in his paintings, and Vallotton for his ability to effortlessly seize a slice of life, a stolen moment, a patch of sky that remains etched on your memory forever and pierces your heart. With those references in mind, we chose frame-by-frame animated painting on a stand, by hand, using brushes. But for the backgrounds and sets, we used a state-of-the-art technique on the Procreate software. The challenge was to combine both techniques. From one sequence to the next, we could not use the same methodology. Therefore, the whole material was mostly hand-crafted by a predominantly female team. With animation, there is no room for error, the editing is extremely precise and you cannot go back. It is not a cinema for remorse, you can only go forward!

Between Gloria and Cléo, it is also a matter of looks...

I wanted Cléo to look for Gloria. The whole subject of the film is how we look at each other, and from where. Despite the distance, the years, and life, we keep looking at each other. Because we have loved each other. Deep down, Cléo knows that she can always turn to Gloria, or at least to the memory of her. Just like in that song by Nilda Fernandez, *Mes yeux dans ton regard*. He was my neighbour when I was a child, he lived in the 18th arrondissement in Paris, I used to run into him all the time. He was this short man with really long hair and an androgynous voice. Laurinda would listen to his music in her lodge, he was a star back then. I love how he gives his telephone number in the song, it is completely outside of time, and so melodramatic.

MARIE AMACHOUKELI'S filmography

SCRIPT AND DIRECTION

2023 àma GLORIA

84' - Lilies films

Opening film Semaine la Critique 2023

2016 I WANT PLUTO TO BE A PLANET AGAIN

Co-directed with Vladimir Mavounia-Kouka

12' (animation) - Autour de Minuit

Collection Canal + 2016 Demain si j'y suis

Nominated for César 2017

2014 PARTY GIRL

Co-directed with Claire Burger and Samuel Theis

86' - Elzévir Films

Opening film at Un Certain Regard 2014

Caméra d'Or Award

2 César nominations 2015

2013 DEMOLITION PARTY

Co-directed with Claire Burger

25' - Dharamsala

2009 C'EST GRATUIT POUR LES FILLES

Co-directed with Claire Burger

25' - Dharamsala

César for Best Short Film

2008 FORBACH

Co-directed with Claire Burger and Samuel Theis

35' - La Fémis

Clermont-Ferrand 2009 - Grand Prix

VR INSTALLATION

2021 HYPNO

Installation for the Opéra de Paris

Within the framework of the 3rd Scene 2020

In collaboration with Flavien Berger
and Kombbo studio

Rerun in June 2023 at the Grand Palais

Cast

Cléo	LOUISE MAUROY-PANZANI
Gloria	ILÇA MORENO ZEGO
Fernanda	ABNARA GOMES VARELA
César	FREDY GOMES TAVARES
Arnaud	ARNAUD REBOTINI
Joachim	DOMINGOS BORGES ALMEIDA

Crew

Script & Direction	MARIE AMACHOUKELI
Animation	MARIE AMACHOUKELI & PIERRE-EMMANUEL LYET
Casting France	CHRISTEL BARAS
Casting Cape Verde	SOLANGE DE CASTRO FERNANDES
Cleo's Coach	LAURE ROUSSEL
Image	INÈS TABARIN
Editing	SUZANA PEDRO
Music	FANNY MARTIN
Sound	YOLANDE DECARSIN, FANNY MARTIN, DANIEL SOBRINO

Executive Producer	BÉNÉDICTE COUVREUR
a production	LILIES FILMS
with the support of	CENTRE NATIONAL DU CINÉMA ET DE L'IMAGE ANIMÉE
with the support of	RÉGION ÎLE-DE-FRANCE
with the participation of	CANAL+, CINÉ+, TV5MONDE
in association with	ARTE/COFINOVA 18 & CINÉCAP 6, LA PROCIREP
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