



Stockbridge Community Cinema

Programme Notes 13 October 2023

Saint Omer

France | 2022 | 122 min | Cert 15

Director: Alice Diop

Screenplay: Alice Diop, Marie N'Diaye, Amrita David

Starring: Kayije Kagame, Guslagie Malanda, Valérie Dréville



This interview with Alice Diop by Tobias Grey first appeared in the Financial Times in January 2023. The director discusses dramatising the trial of a woman who left her child to die and why it reflects 'a very French form of racism'

When Alice Diop decided to attend the 2016 trial of Fabienne Kabou, a young Senegalese woman found guilty of leaving her 15-month-old daughter to drown on a French beach, she wasn't expecting to break down in tears. "I was ashamed to find myself crying," Diop says. "But when I turned around I saw that many of the women attending the trial — and there were a lot of them, not just locals but others who had travelled from afar — were also weeping."

It was at this moment, on the last day of the trial in Saint-Omer, northern France, during a compassionate summing up by Kabou's defence lawyer, that Diop, 43, knew she wanted to make her first fictional feature film, having already directed a string of lauded documentaries. "I think each of us women had been caught up in inextricable feelings of what it means to be a mother," Diop says. "It was this universal dimension touching so many women at once, which convinced me I wanted to make a film about the trial. But it couldn't be a documentary because otherwise I would have been confined to a lurid news story."

We are sitting in a shabby-chic café in Montreuil, on the eastern outskirts of Paris, and Diop is on tenterhooks as she is about to find out if her film Saint Omer is one of the five nominees for Best International Feature Film at this year's Academy Awards. As it turns out Saint Omer failed to make the cut but the fact it made the shortlist as France's entry

for the awards is a kind of victory in itself. In 70 years of French entries, Saint Omer, which already won the Grand Jury Prize at last year's Venice Film Festival, is the first to have been directed by a black woman.

The distinction is not one that Diop particularly likes to dwell on. "I think of myself as a film-maker and not as a black woman," she says. "I was just very honoured to have been chosen by my peers for a film like this, which treats the question of black women's bodies in a universal way. In that respect my film is very political. I've always had the conviction that the black body can be universal. When I read Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, I recognised a part of my own humanity. Why shouldn't people recognise themselves in a film about black women and the question of motherhood?"

Saint Omer stars Guslagie Malanda as Laurence Coly, a woman loosely based on Fabienne Kabou, and Kayije Kagame as Rama, a newly pregnant writer who attends Coly's trial in the hope of turning it into a novel. "By creating the fictional character of Rama I could put my finger on what interested me about everything I heard during the trial," Diop says. "This is not a film that investigates a crime, but one that questions the complexity of the maternal bond. The difficulty of being a mother is very rarely talked about. The profound anguish of what it means to be a mother or to become a mother is hardly ever spoken of. That's what interested me."

Diop, who has a son, worked on the script for Saint Omer in parallel with her 2021 documentary Nous, which won the Encounters Award at that year's Berlin Film Festival. She found that research for Nous, which drew inspiration from the experience of her parents,

who emigrated to France from Senegal, subtly nourished her screenplay for *Saint Omer*. She co-wrote it with regular collaborator Amrita David and Prix-Goncourt-winning novelist Marie Ndiaye. "Now I can see that there are echoes in each film, which I didn't notice when I was writing them," she says. "One of the reasons I make films is to conjure these ghostly presences and recount the lives of these invisible bodies"

Diop based the look of the apartment in *Saint Omer*, where Rama lives with her husband and mother, on the one she grew up in on the outskirts of Paris. "Perhaps it was a way of taking some distance and protecting myself from the story that *Saint Omer* tells," she says. In *Nous*, Diop's mother, who died when she was 17, is a fleeting presence shown briefly in a home movie that the film-maker rediscovered many years after her death. For *Saint Omer*, Diop created home movies of Rama's family inspired by the ones in *Nous*. "In a way, it felt like I was recreating the life of my own mother if she had lived longer," she says. "One of the reasons I make films is to conjure these ghostly presences and recount the lives of these invisible bodies."

In various ways, all of Diop's films explore the migration experience. Her 2007 documentary *Les Sénégalaises et la Sénégalaise* analysed the emotional and psychological impact that it can have on the children of immigrants, while 2016's *La Permanence* is about a doctor who heals men traumatised by the experience of exile. In *Saint Omer* Laurence is depicted as an intelligent woman who nonetheless has a tenuous grasp on reality. Her lawyer wonders what happened to the once-confident young woman who travelled to France from Senegal to study law and philosophy: "Consider this young lady, full of ambitions and desire, arriving in Paris, and ask yourself this question: how did she become this isolated, invisible woman, hiding in her partner's studio?" he asks.

Diop, who studied colonial history at the Sorbonne before becoming a film-maker, found herself identifying with Kabou, the inspiration for Coly, on several levels. Her articulacy, for one: "I wondered why French journalists were making such a big deal out of the fact that she is extremely well-spoken. She is an academic after all." There is a moment in the film when one of Coly's former teachers is testifying and declares that she doesn't understand why an African woman would want to write her thesis on

Wittgenstein: "Why not choose someone closer to her own culture?"

Diop notes that this was something she transcribed verbatim from Kabou's trial. "If I picked up on it, then no doubt it's because I'm a black woman and I know what this means," she says. "This film is linked to who I am and what I saw in the way people perceived this woman. It's something that reveals a form of racism that is very French."

Diop is not sure yet what her next film will be. But as a true formalist she already has a good idea of how she will approach it. "I'm sure it will be an extension of something I have learnt or experienced in a previous film," she says. "I don't yet know whether it will be a documentary or a fiction, but I don't really see there being much of a separation between the two. The subject is what will determine my decision."