



fish

Saint Omer
(France 2022)

Spoiler alert: You may prefer to read this review after the screening

DIRECTOR : Alice Diop
RUNNING TIME : 123 mins
RATING : [M]

Synopsis:

Alice Diop's unnerving fiction feature is based on the true case of a Senegalese immigrant accused in the French court of murdering her 15-month-old daughter

Review: Peter Bradshaw

Documentary maker Alice Diop delivers a piercing fiction feature in the form of a courtroom drama, based on a real-life case: mysterious, tragic and intimately unnerving. The severity and poise of this calmly paced movie, its emotional reserve and moral seriousness – and the elusive, implied confessional dimension concerning Diop herself – make it an extraordinary experience.

Kayije Kagame plays Rama, a bestselling author and academic who lives in Paris and is heading to the town of Saint Omer, near Calais, to write what her publishers hope will be some commercially delicious literary reportage about a shocking criminal case. Laurence Coly (superbly played by Guslagie Malanda) is a woman on trial for murdering her 15-month-old daughter, by leaving her on the beach to be drowned by the incoming tide.

Like Rama, the defendant is of Senegalese background; like Rama, she is well educated and articulate; like Rama she is alienated from her mother and like Rama, she has, or had, a white partner. Rama had intended to compare this case to the myth of Medea: a conceit revealed to be glib and obtuse as she realises the relevant comparison is closer to hand. She is overwhelmed by what she witnesses and by Coly's brazen defence, maintained with unflinching, enigmatic conviction: that she was subject to sorcery and spells from her aunts back in Senegal. This is inspired by the actual case of Fabienne Kabou, who relied on the same argument and whose 2015 trial was attended by Diop.

Cont.

FILMS IN THE SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS INC

10.00 am Sunday 17th March 2024

8.15 pm Tuesday 19th March 2024

Review: Cont.

The courtroom procedural, conducted in cold, clear daylight, allows Diop to dramatise the pure astonishment of the court and the French secular state at Coly's defence. Despite conceding the prosecution's version of events in every particular, she is not pleading guilty and advancing her "sorcery" argument as a mitigating circumstance of, say, postnatal depression. She is – crucially – pleading not guilty; Coly wishes to walk free on the grounds that "sorcery" is a legitimate alternative culprit which white westerners should exert themselves to understand.

The gripping legal proceedings touch on race, class, gender, culture and the tide of history and power. After the jury is empanelled, Diop shows how jurors of various ages, professions and ethnic backgrounds are vetoed on depressingly obvious grounds by the defence and prosecution. The court is then tellingly informed that the baby's wretched corpse, washed up on shore, was at first naturally mistaken for a "migrant drowned in a shipwreck". Coly's unhappy childhood in Senegal and womanhood in France is juxtaposed with delicately shaped, faintly Akermannesque flashbacks about Rama's own youth and the unhappiness of her mother.

Coly is impassive and unemotional until almost the very end, evasive and ambiguous in her answers; this is something mistaken for impenitence by the prosecution. The state calls Coly's racist PhD supervisor to the witness stand, who mocks her desire to study Wittgenstein instead of "someone from her own culture". But Coly's own mother (Salimata Kamate) declines to discuss her daughter's motivation because there are things that "we can't be clear about"; might that recall Wittgenstein's famous maxim about the things whereof we cannot speak?

Diop's film could be said to be on the defence's side, in that while she shows the eloquent closing argument from the defence lawyer Maître Vaudenay (Aurélia Petit), addressed directly into the camera and to us, the audience, she does not show the corresponding final speech from the prosecutor (Robert Cantarella), and in fact cuts off some of his bruising cross-examination to show Rama unhappily alone later in her hotel room. But Diop does show plenty of interrogative questioning from the court president (a composed, lucid performance from Valérie Dréville) which utterly demolishes her "sorcery" argument.

Could it be that both Coly's crime and her defence are an existential refusal of her fate, a radical, cruel, bloodstained gesture of transgression and dissent, as a black woman in the white first world, yearning for a western education and western status, but somehow a mendicant with a baby? Does Diop wish us to see Coly as the new equivalent of Pierre Rivière, the outsider criminal discovered by Michel Foucault? Or is the film rather a fictionalised working through of Diop's own complex, turbulent feelings of revulsion and sympathy as she herself sat in the public gallery? It is vital film-making.

Source: www.guardian.com ~ Peter Bradshaw 8/2/2023 : Edited extracts accessed 1/1/24.

Some Thoughts on: *Alcarras*

Carla Simón's *Alcarràs* is a beautifully crafted drama that delves into the lives of the Solé family who are facing the imminent loss of their peach orchard after generations of working the land. Through its captivating story, the film explores various themes and showcases powerful performances,

The impending loss of the land looms large throughout the film, representing not just economic hardship but also the end of an era and the erosion of identity. The film sensitively portrays each of the characters' grief and struggles to adapt.

The film centralises the tension between preserving centuries-old traditions and embracing the economic opportunities offered by modernity. The arrival of solar panels symbolises the inevitable march of progress, forcing the family to confront their future.

Alcarràs paints a rich tapestry of family relationships, showcasing the love, loyalty, and disagreements within the Solé clan. It explores the generational divides as younger members grapple with change while elders cling to tradition.

The film avoids portraying clear-cut heroes and villains. Each character faces difficult choices with ethical implications. Quimet's unwavering commitment to tradition can be seen as stubbornness, while the Pinyol family's desire to modernize their land raises questions about economic inequality and the impact on local communities. Even the younger generation's yearning for a different future presents ethical dilemmas regarding leaving their family and heritage behind.

The film's strength lies in its naturalistic performances, particularly by the non-professional actors portraying the Solé family. Jordi Pujol Dolcet delivers a nuanced portrayal of Quimet, grappling with the new reality. Anna Otin shines as Dolores the wife and mother caught between tradition and change. The young actors playing the children offer heartfelt and innocent performances which offer some comic relief against the backdrop of tension within the family.

The film, however, was a little too long and could have had the same impact with more editing to improve its overall pacing.

Jeanetta Kettle.

** Many thanks to Jeanetta for providing the above review at very short notice. Our best wishes to resident reviewer Ross Armfield, who was unwell and unable to attend the screening of *Alcarras*. Ed.

Message from the President

Thank you to the people who have recommended films to us. We will do our best to research their availability to us.

We also appreciated comments which reflect that others are aware of our desire to screen thought-provoking films in spite of the fact that we aren't able to preview them.

It is impossible to please all the people all of the time, but we try!

Please remember to turn your phones off, to arrive before the screening, and to remain seated until the credits have rolled.

We hope you find our next film thought provoking.

Roz Garwen

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COMING UP

April	<i>Nostalgia</i> [Italy]	Sunday 7 th & Tuesday 9 th
May	<i>The Last Film Show</i> [India]	Sunday 19 th & Tuesday 21 st
June	<i>Goliath</i> [France]	Sunday 16 th & Tuesday 18 th

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