



BANEL & ADAMA



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
COMPETITION
2023 OFFICIAL SELECTION

A film by Ramata-Toulaye Sy

PRESSKIT



— BANEL & ADAMA

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SAT. 20th, 3:00 PM @ THEATRE LUMIERE
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SAT. 20th, 3:30 PM @ SALLE BAZIN (Press)

SUN. 21st, 9:00 AM @ SALLE AGNÈS VARDA
(Official Rerun)

SUN. 21st, 12:00 PM @ OLYMPIA 4
(Market – Buyers only)

SUN. 21st, 12:30 PM @ THEATRE LUMIERE
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TUE. 23rd, 1:45 PM @ LERINS 2 (Market)

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SYNOPSIS

Banel and Adama are fiercely in love. The young married couple lives in a remote village in northern Senegal. For them, nothing else exists. Yet their perfect everlasting love is on a collision course with their community's customs. Because in this world, there is no room for passion, let alone chaos.

A CONVERSATION WITH RAMATA-TOULAYE SY



“Banel & Adama” is the result of your graduation work at La Fémis. Tell us about its origins...

I wanted to write a great tragic love story; a story in which everyone could recognize themselves. And I wanted it to take place in Senegal, the country where my parents come from. I saw it as a political gesture. I admit the word is strong, but it seems to me that it is appropriate. At the time I was working on the script, I had the feeling that most of the contemporary African films I was discovering were about violence, war, terrorism, poverty... all in a naturalistic form. Genre cinema had a hard time finding its place: of course, there were some proposals, but very few. It is from this reflection that my desire for a universal film, which would speak to Africans but not only, became clear to me. I’ve been passionate about literature since I was a child, and I dreamed of creating a great tragedy, mixed with magical realism, poetry, but also with the codes of the tale. My desire was to invent a character as mythical as Medea or Phaedra. Of course, Africa has a lot of well-known fictional figures but none that go beyond the borders of the continent. Universality is an essential notion for me.

Why did you wait seven years before directing?

It’s true that I took my time, because when I left La Fémis, I didn’t feel mature enough to go into directing, and I was more interested in screenwriting. That’s why I went into this program during my studies at the school. After graduation, I co-wrote two screenplays that enabled me to learn a lot from the filmmakers I worked with, and it was in 2020 that I decided to start directing with my short film “Astel”, which I envisioned as a trial run before moving on to feature films.

“Astel”, your multi-awarded short film which already took place in Senegal, tells the story of a young girl’s emancipation. Banel, your heroine, also seems to share this same quest. From the first images, we understand that the passion she feels for her husband, Adama, pushes her to aspire to an independent life, far from their community. Except that this passion leads her much further, towards a devastating madness...

The theme of madness is crucial in the film. At the beginning, we see Banel only as a rebel. She wears a man’s shirt, she has short hair, she has freed herself from wearing a scarf. But in this first part of the story, we intentionally remain in a rather classical narration where the woman marks her will to free herself from traditions. However, very quickly, Banel’s fierce and obstinate desire to live a different life takes over and we understand that the film is not about her emancipation - because for me, Banel is already free. Little by little we discover her personality without really understanding who she really is. It is the little details - the way she teases Adama for believing in the legend of the avenging mermaids, the slingshot that never leaves her, the fly that she drowns with her saliva, and finally the confession she makes about men to Coudy before killing a bird... - that allow us to understand how different Banel is. Throughout the film, I wanted us to ask ourselves “who is this strange woman? A killer or a lover? A sacred woman or a martyr? I mentioned Medea because, to me, Banel is a kind of Medea. A passionate woman who kills for love.

To emphasize the evolution of this madness, you play a lot with lights.

Absolutely. The more she progresses, the more her heart dries up and the more the image adapts to her state of mind. That’s why, with Amine Berrada, the film’s director of photogra-

phy, with whom I had already collaborated on my short film, we wanted for the first part of the film a warm, almost dreamlike light, which magnifies the very colorful landscapes. Then, little by little, the image is nibbled away, as people are getting crushed under the weight of convention. A discoloration of the image - and of the costumes - occurs, barely perceptible from one scene to the next, and it is only at the end of the film that we notice this loss of color and the dazzling whiteness of the light. The same phenomenon occurs with the sound. In the second part, we no longer hear the leaves moving in the trees, the birds singing, the animals screaming... Everything is silent. Everything is dead.

Out of love for Banel, Adama refuses to become the village chief, a role he is required to assume by tradition. Except that the chaos that falls on his community ends up pushing him to sacrifice himself.

At first, we think that Adama is free, that he is very much in love with Banel... But little by little, we realize that when confronted with adversity and torn between Banel and the community, he becomes “like all the other men” that Banel describes under the tree. For me, the viewer can sense very early in the plot that this love is doomed to failure because Adama’s actions and words are the opposite of Banel’s. They don’t share the same life philosophy and are experiencing a total duality: “We don’t care about others,” Banel tells him. He does. She kills, he saves - birds, people. She thinks only of their love, their homes; he thinks of his dying community. Banel may seem selfish, like Medea, but to me she has reason to be because she is a woman and it is hard to be one. She fights for her survival. Her existence.

Her only pleasure is to be with Adama. Banel refuses to do the laundry with the other women, is reluctant to go to work in the fields with them and, above all, she does not want children.

Not having children is something that is unheard of in these societies, and it seemed interesting to me to show a woman so consumed with passion that she does not want to become a mother. She doesn’t need anything or anyone. Except Adama. During the preparation of the film, I ended up wondering if Banel really loved Adama. She loves him, of course, but she is a smart woman who knows that in the community she belongs to, you can’t do anything without a man. She needs him to get her way. I liked this new duality in her.

Tell us about these houses buried under the sand outside the village and which the community considers evil. This is where Banel plans to settle with Adama; the only promise of faraway...

There is a sentence in the synopsis that I particularly like: “Outside (the village), nothing exists”. I knew I didn’t want Banel and Adama, or the other members of the village, to try to emigrate to the city or Europe. I wanted to show characters who are happy where they live. It was important not to get lost in social issues. However, I felt that I had to find a difficult goal to achieve for this couple. Fouta-Toro is surrounded by a sandy area, so I invented these houses that Banel and Adama work to clear with tremendous effort, first with a shovel, then with their hands. With these houses, we leave the tragedy and enter the tale.





And what about the disasters that struck the community: the drought, the decimated herd, soon all the animals, then the people of the village...

Suddenly, it's as if the seven plagues of Egypt fell upon them. The passion of Banel and Adama is obviously the cause. But this drought and its dramatic consequences were also an opportunity for me to indirectly evoke climate change, the lack of water - increasingly severe in Africa and throughout the world.

There are beautiful scenes in the film - the dreamlike scene of the fisherman who's a friend of the mermaids, the wide shot of Banel and Adama digging to reveal the roof of a house covered in sand, the scene where Banel burns the lizards she has killed, the shots under the hundred-year-old tree... - as if each one were made into a real painting.

I grew up with popular movies and blockbusters and for me, cinema is synonymous with "spectacular". That being said, everyone has their own definition of entertainment... For my part, I like to compose my shots like paintings. Besides, one often asks filmmakers for their influences, and mine are mainly literary and pictorial - Toni Morrison, whose magic realism I love, Racine and his tragedies, Maya Angelou and her poetry, but also Van Gogh, Edvard Munch, Kerry James Marshall and Amoako Boafo's paintings. The griot stories my mother told me as a child also inspire me. It's a patchwork of who I am: a girl with dual French and Senegalese nationality, who was born and raised in France, but who was educated in Senegalese culture. I try to organize this gender clash in a coherent way.

What do these three images of the sun symbolize? They punctuate the narrative and give it an almost incandescent character?

We imagined them with Vincent Tricon, the editor, during the editing of the film. For me, Banel is the daughter of the sun, she is the sacred fire. She is a being who fell from the sky and who found herself by chance in this small village. Banel burns constantly, with all her being, because she has no place on earth. These suns, beyond the fact that they allow (intended) chaptering, can be perceived differently by different viewers. I tell myself that this is where Banel lands when she dies and is finally free, finally at home.

Khady Mane, who plays Banel, and Mamadou Diallo, who plays Adama, are, as all the other actors in the film, non-professionals. How did you find them and prepare them?

The casting process, which we began five months before the start of shooting, was long and complex. It took place in the region of Podor (in the northwest of Senegal) and Iman Djionne, the casting director, focused on the major cities of the region, but also the villages that surround them. Iman asked the candidates to improvise from the script. The character that was the most difficult to find was Banel. I spotted Khady by chance, in the street, about a month before the shooting started. I was talking with some young girls, and our eyes met. Her eyes immediately caught my attention because, despite her natural shyness, I saw a mystery in them, a little glimmer of madness.

Did you do any special work with Khady and Mamadou beforehand?

I showed Khady two films - “Camille Claudel”, by Bruno Nuytten, and “L’Histoire d’Adèle H”, by François Truffaut. Through these two characters of passionate lovers who go mad, I wanted her to understand what I expected from her. Mamadou, who is younger, was more impulsive. My job was mostly to channel him. I also made sure that Khady and Mamadou were together as often as possible. Since we found Khady quite late, I was afraid they would not bond easily. But, luckily, they became close very quickly. I think it shows on the screen. Today, they are very close friends.

You shot “Banel & Adama” in Fula language in Fouta-Toro. Is this a tribute to your origins?

When I was writing “Banel & Adama”, I thought of the village where my parents come from and where I often spent my vacation. What interested me in this Fula culture was its people, with their particular physiognomy and known principles: they express their emotions through their gaze and their silence. They are a people who are known to be dignified, but above all very proud. What interested me most was to confront a character such as Banel, who is passionate and expressive, with such a community. And then, aesthetically, I found it beautiful to make a rather silent film where the dialogues are expressed more by the body and the glances than by speech.

At thirty-six years old, you are a leading figure of the young African generation. How do you feel about this?

I am happy and especially proud to be part of this young generation of African filmmakers. Especially since in recent years, the narratives are evolving: Mati Diop (with “Atlantique”) and Jean-Luc Herbulot (with “Saloum”) have begun to change things by playing with the codes of genre cinema. Cinema, and art in particular/general, is becoming more and more important in Senegal and in Africa. And this is an extremely exciting development for the continent because there are still many stories to tell, many forms and genres to explore, and above all: many works to create.





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— BIOGRAPHY RAMATA-TOULAYE SY

French-senegalese Ramata-Toulaye SY was born and raised in the Paris region. She joined La fémis in 2011 in the Screenwriting department, from which she graduated in 2015. Ramata-Toulaye worked, among others, as a screenwriter on the film ‘Sibel’ (2018) by C. Zencirci and G. Giovanetti as well as on ‘Our Lady of the Nile’ (2019) by A. Rahimi. In 2020, Ramata-Toulaye directed her first short film, ‘Astel’, selected in more than 80 festivals and pre-selected for the 2023 César Awards. ‘Banel & Adama’ is her first feature film.

CAST

Banel	Khady Mane
Adama	Mamadou Diallo
Adama’s Mother	Binta Racine Sy
Racine	Moussa Sow
Coudy	Ndiabel Diallo
Abou Dia	Oumar Samba Dia
Malik	Amadou Ndiaye
Uncle 1	Amadou Hady Sall
Uncle 2	Cherif Diallo
Djibril	Nima Ba
Omar	Amadou Kane Sylla

CREW

Director	Ramata-Toulaye Sy
Screenplay	Ramata-Toulaye Sy
Director of Photography	Amine Berrada
1st Assistant Director	Fabacary Assymby Coly
Production Design	Oumar Sall
Artistic Director	Rafael Mathias Monteiro
Script Supervisor	Angèle Pignon
Production Manager	Assane Diagne
Casting	Iman Djionne
Wardrobe design	Mariam Diop
Makeup Design	Marième Ngom
Editing	Vincent Tricon
Sound	Benjamin Silvestre
Sound Edit	Olivier Voisin
Sound Mix	Jean-Pierre Laforce
Original Music	Bachar Mar-Khalifé
Color Grading	Magali Léonard
Post-production	Christina Crassaris, Sidonie Waserman
Production	La Chauve-Souris, Take Shelter, Astou Films, Astou Production, DS Productions, Canal+ International, Arte France Cinéma

CREW

Production	LA CHAUVE-SOURIS and TAKE SHELTER
Producers	Eric Névé
	Margaux Juvénal
	Maud Leclair Névé
Coproducers	Souleymane Kébé
	Oumar Gabar Sy
	Andrey Samouté Diarra
In coproduction with	ASTOU FILMS, ASTOU PRODUCTION, DS PRODUCTIONS, CANAL+ INTERNATIONAL and ARTE FRANCE CINEMA
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With the support of	CENTRE NATIONAL DU CINÉMA ET DE L'IMAGE ANIMÉE, FONDS JEUNE CRÉATION FRANCOPHONE, FONDS IMAGE DE LA FRANCOPHONIE, FONDS DE PROMOTION DE L'INDUSTRIE CINÉMATOGRAPHIQUE, AUDIOVISUELLE DU SÉNÉGAL (FOPICA) and DOHA FILM INSTITUTE
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In association with	CINEMAGE 17
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