

# FILM REVIEWS

## FEATURE FILMS

**Alain Gomis, dir. *Félicité*.** 2017. 124 minutes. Lingala (with French and English subtitles). Jour 2 Fête, DVD, €19.99.

*Félicité* is the title of the fourth feature-length film by award-winning Franco-Senegalese filmmaker Alain Gomis. In line with the international success of his previous films, *Félicité* has won numerous awards at internationally acclaimed film festivals, such as the Golden Stallion award at FESPACO at Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) and the Silver Bear grand jury prize at the 67<sup>th</sup> Berlin International Film Festival. It was also awarded six prizes at the Nigerian 2017 Africa Movie Academy Awards, and was shortlisted among the finalist titles for the category of Best Foreign Language Film for the 90<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards, making history as the first-ever Senegalese film nominated for an Oscar.

The film opens with credits over a black screen as we are immersed in the story through sound—that of a bustling bar in Kinshasa. The first shot that we see is not that of a crowd, but of *Félicité* (Véronique Tshanda Beya Mputu), in a close-up that focuses on her thoughtful gaze. The handheld camera travels around the bar to turn then to a medium shot of Tabu “I am Tabu: Tabu Fatou” (Papi Mpaka), who is experiencing a sort of existential moment of inebriety. As the music from the balafone increases in volume, *Félicité* is shown again, still in silence, walking calmly toward the stage. The first time we hear her is when she sings, with a husky texture that emerges from her womb, in a visceral way, suggesting a strength emerging from her life experience and struggle. The next day, *Félicité* wakes up to find that her fridge is not working, and she calls on Tabu—who is in love with her, even though she does not have time for love in her daily struggle. What seems a small incident of everyday life is followed by a phone call from the hospital that will shape the rest of the action in the film. Her son Samo (Gaetan Claudia) has had a motorcycle accident and risks losing a leg if he does not go through surgery. This costs over a million Congolese francs and must be paid prior to the operation. *Félicité* immediately goes to great lengths in search of that sum, encountering all sorts of obstacles.

This film showcases Alain Gomis at his finest. *Félicité* is the product of a director who keeps challenging his aesthetic limits by moving beyond comfort areas and pushing the aural, visual, tactile, and multi-sensorial

dimensions of the film. When Samo returns home from the hospital, having lost his leg, superimposed images of him in slow-motion show not just a hopeless teenager, but a mother struggling to handle the harshness of her everyday challenges. The phantasmagoric features of the slow-motion superimposed images resemble shots seen in Mambéty's cinema. They further reflect the resilience of the subjective time within the psychology of this female warrior, whose level of perception supersedes that of those surrounding her. A psychological space in the darkness of an imagined forest seems to be where Félicité is at ease, in nature, with the sound of crickets and a flowing river. Félicité recurrently travels there in her dreams, in almost complete darkness, inviting us to travel to her subconscious, away from the overwhelming Kinshasa milieu.

Beyond these visual cinematic qualities, sound plays a determinant role in the multi-sensorial depiction of Félicité's psychological displacement, which Gomis explores in this film. Silence communicates better than words the hostility of everyday life as experienced internally by the different characters, and especially as embodied in the character of Félicité. Like the slow-motion superimposed images, the soundtrack is also multi-layered. On the one hand, there are the rough, coarse club tones of the bar where Félicité works. This bustling sound is taken over by the live music played by the Kasai Allstars, whose style is known as "Congotronics," and whose lead voice is that of Félicité. Her singing barges in cathartically to express everything that remains "unsaid." This sound contrasts with the minimalist classical music by Arvo Pärt, arranged and interpreted by the Congolese symphonic orchestra Kimbanguiste, with a leading violin motif and choral voices.

*Félicité* is the first of Gomis' four feature-length films to star a female character. It is an ode to life and happiness, led by a strong independent woman whose name (Félicité) means Happiness. This depiction of Félicité echoes that of other female characters in Senegalese cinema, like Collé in Sembène's film *Mooladé* (2004), and Karmen in Gaï Ramaka's *Karmen Geï* (2001). Félicité is an earthly heroine in her simplicity and determination, and in that she represents a large part of the population anywhere in the world, battling the hostility of everyday life in defense of dignity. This is masterfully conveyed by Gomis through the film's setting in Kinshasa, an urban area of contrasts, contradictions, and social inequalities. In Gomis' words, it is "the place of the possible renewal and the final defeat (...) with an enormous subsoil richness and big poverty, at the same time" (interview with Bertrand Loutte, 2016). The film shows a space where people die in hospitals because they cannot afford treatment, while others enjoy luxurious villas and cars and work in skyscrapers in the city.

With *Félicité*, Alain Gomis establishes himself as a prolific and internationally acclaimed filmmaker with a unique aesthetic approach.

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