



Saint Omer

Directed by: Alice Diop
©: Crab Films, Arte France Cinéma
Production Companies: Crab Films,
Arte France Cinéma, Pictanovo Hauts-de-France
With the participation of: Arte France, Canal+,
Ciné+, Les Films du Losange,
Wild Bunch International
Presented by: Crab Films
International Sales: Wild Bunch International
Produced by: Toufik Ayadi, Christophe Barral
Production Managers: Rym Hachimi, Paul Sergent
Location Manager: Emma Lebot
Post-production Supervisor: Bénédicte Pollet
Assistant Directors: Barbara Canale, Julia Canarelli
Script Supervisor: Mathilde Profit
Casting Director: Stéphane Batut
Written by: Alice Diop, Amrita David, Marie Ndiaye
[Screenplay] Consultation: Zoé Galeron
Director of Photography: Claire Mathon
Visual Effects Supervisor: Vincent Vacarisas
Editing: Amrita David
Art Director: Anna Le Mouel
Property Master: Peyo Jolivet
Costume Designer: Annie Melza Tiburce
Make-up Supervisors: Élodie Namani Cyrille,
Marie Goetheluck
Titles: Elena Germain
Music Supervisor: Thibault Deboaisne
Choreographer: Bintou Dembele
Sound/Production Sound Mixer:
Dana Farzanehpour
Sound/Dialogue Editor: Lucile Demarquet
Sound/Supervising Sound Editor:
Josefina Rodriguez
Sound/Re-recording Mixer: Emmanuel Croset
Unit Publicist: Viviana Andriani
Cast:
Kayije Kagame (Rama)
Guslagie Malanda (Laurence Coly)
Valérie Dréville (the president)
Aurélia Petit (Maître Vaudenay, lawyer)
Xavier Maly (Luc Domontet)
Robert Cantarella (Advocate General)
Salimata Kamate (Odile Diatta)
Thomas De Pourquery (Adrien)
Adama Diallo Tamba (Seynabou)
Maryam Diop (Khady)
Dado Diop (Tening)
Charlotte Clamens (Cécile Jobard)
Seyna Kane (young Seynabou)
Cousba-Mar Thiam (teenage Rama)
Binta Thiam (child Rama)
Alain Payen (voice of publisher)
Louise Lemoine-Torres
(voice of Maître Darcourt, lawyer)
France 2022©
123 mins
Digital

The screening on Wed 12 Nov will be introduced by Xavier Alexandre Pillai, BFI TV Programmer

Big Screen Classics

Saint Omer

Saint Omer, a film of stark, unnerving poise and resonance, is a distillation of a true 2016 case in which a philosophy student called Fabienne Kabou was tried in the town of Saint-Omer in northern France for drowning her baby Adélaïde on a nearby beach. Reconfiguring transcripts from the trial for its dialogue, it turns Kabou into Guslagie Malanda's luminous Laurence Coly, a Senegalese-French woman who ascribes her atrocity to sorcery, while calmly telling a life story of increasingly cloistered isolation. Over and above that, the film refracts the experience of the film's director, Alice Diop, as a witness to Kabou's trial. Diop, for two decades a documentarian of French postcolonial stories of race, class and gender, attended while pregnant and found herself stirred and disturbed.

'At the beginning it was informal. When I heard about the trial I got quite obsessed, but privately, because it was a strange thing to be obsessed by,' she says. 'Then I spent five days at the trial and understood why I was there: the relationship I have with my mother, my own maternity; it unpacked many more things than I imagined I was going to find. It was this strange attraction of all these women like me who felt the need to come to the trial with no clear reason. We all had this shocked reaction, thinking about our own maternity: a collective experience.'

In *Saint Omer*, the witness is Rama, a literature professor played by Kayije Kagame with grave, furrowed reserve and apprehension. A lecture by Rama reflecting on womanhood and motherhood under duress in Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) and Pasolini's *Medea* (1969) stands in stark contrast to her emotional reticence and repression around her family, especially her silent mother. This vexed wall of non-communication between daughter and mother – and the haplessness of Rama's partner's attempts to penetrate it – is very familiar (to some of us), I tell Diop, yet new and revelatory on screen.

'I was very surprised by the reaction of men,' she says. 'The only men on the team were my two producers, and the first time we realised the power of the material was a screening in the middle of editing; my producer cried and cried. He said: "It's not just about my wife, it's about my mother in my mind." It's an entry to the darkness of motherhood. Women, we know that all the mothers are crazy. But for men, it's a way to enter this question.' Still, she adds, 'this film is about a Black French woman from immigrant parents whose mother's silence is a construct of the colonial experience. They can't say that they've been vanquished by the colonial experience, so they're silent. That's the rupture Rama has, and all her friends who are French Black women will have with their own mothers. The silence is a break in transmission.' While the film uses details from Diop's own history – including recreations of home movies like those seen in her suburban travelogue essay *We* (2021) – it is far from self-portraiture. 'I'm creating fiction from things that are very real... a reconstruction with very precise references,' Diop says. Her own parents died when she was young, but she calls the film 'a catharsis for women of my generation, who can do a proper grieving for things that were never said.'

Equally, while Malanda (an art curator who, Diop says, quit acting ten years ago for want of good roles) plays Coly with the stillness of one of Robert Bresson's 'models', and Diop and cinematographer Claire Mathon frame and

Become a BFI Member

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

Big Screen Classics

One Way or Another De cierta manera

Mon 20 Oct 18:20; Sun 2 Nov 18:20;

Tue 4 Nov 20:30

Black Girl La noire de...

Mon 20 Oct 20:45; Thu 30 Oct 18:30;

Fri 28 Nov 12:30

Touki Bouki

Tue 21 Oct 18:30; Tue 11 Nov 20:50

Medicine for Melancholy

Wed 22 Oct 18:20 (+ intro by film curator and writer

Jonathan Ali); Thu 6 Nov 18:15

Crooklyn

Wed 22 Oct 20:30; Sat 1 Nov 20:40;

Sat 8 Nov 20:45; Fri 21 Nov 18:10

Killer of Sheep

Thu 23 Oct 20:50; Tue 28 Oct 21:00;

Sun 16 Nov 18:30; Thu 20 Nov 12:20

A Different Image + Perfect Image

Fri 24 Oct 18:20; Wed 5 Nov 18:10

Pressure

Sat 25 Oct 20:30; Fri 7 Nov 18:10; Fri 14 Nov 14:40;

Sun 23 Nov 18:15

Soleil Ô

Sun 26 Oct 14:30; Sat 15 Nov 20:35;

Mon 24 Nov 20:30

Mangrove

Mon 27 Oct 20:30; Sat 22 Nov 17:30

The Passion of Remembrance

+ Step Forward Youth

Wed 29 Oct 18:00 (+ intro); Tue 25 Nov 20:45

Atlantics Atlantique

Fri 31 Oct 20:40; Sun 9 Nov 18:30;

Tue 18 Nov 14:40; Sat 29 Nov 12:00

Daughters of the Dust

Mon 3 Nov 18:15; Sun 30 Nov 12:20

Ethnic Notions + Looking for Langston

Mon 10 Nov 20:45; Wed 19 Nov 18:10 (+ intro)

Saint Omer

Wed 12 Nov 17:45 (+ intro by Xavier Alexandre Pillai, BFI TV Programmer); Mon 17 Nov 14:30; Thu 27 Nov 20:35

Haitian Corner

Thu 13 Nov 20:55; Wed 26 Nov 18:10 (+ intro)

Sight and Sound

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25*

* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info: sightsoundsub.bfi.org.uk/subscribe

SIGHT AND SOUND

BFI Player

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

light her like one of Pedro Costa's haunted migrants, perhaps thrust into the dock of Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), echoes of the fictional canon are 'digested' influences, not direct invocations. 'Bresson is there to assist me in going to the end of my thinking or my intentions,' she says. 'Basically, in this film I give a large space for the spectator to think on their own; I'm not there to instruct them.'

'That's one part of having these long takes, and the other is political: to give this woman centre stage. To give space to see this woman properly, to hear her and let her express herself, called for an extremely precise way of framing her: centre-stage, not the edge of the frame. Normally, a working-class Black woman isn't given this kind of role.'

Nick Bradshaw, *Sight and Sound*, March 2023

Saint Omer is a remarkable feat in numerous ways. The acting is uniformly superb, even when it's simply dispassionate testimony that's being dispatched. Kagame plays Rama in a state of continual displacement, ill at ease at dinner with her mother, uncomfortable on the streets of Saint-Omer and conspicuous in the courtroom; Malanda evokes profound pain through the tiniest cracks in her expressions and voices as she revisits traumatic memories. Beyond the two women at the film's centre, each role is faultlessly acted, from the man (Xavier Maly) who fathered the baby with Coly and testifies to their turbulent relationship, to the judge (Valérie Dréville) who wants to understand the emotional reality of the case but is committed to the legal truth, interjecting with cold facts when accounts deviate, to the defence barrister (Aurélia Petit) whose harrowing concluding speech, spoken plainly to camera, touches on everything from the purpose of justice to the raw biology of motherhood. Diop cuts to the silent grieving faces of the women in the courtroom as the lawyer affirms what they know to be true: 'We carry within us the traces of our mothers and our daughters who in turn carry ours. It is a never-ending chain. In a way, us women, we are all monsters. We are all terribly human monsters.'

Diop's careful direction allows the elegant dialogue to soar. Each frame, each cut, is characterised by the exquisite precision that makes her non-fiction work so compelling. *Saint Omer*, like Coly herself, does not have answers, and Diop steers away from the usual courtroom drama conventions that culminate in confident judgments. With each testimony's contradictions taking us farther and farther from any knowable truth, the story of Laurence Coly becomes all the more impactful. Rama and Laurence leave us haunted, unable to truly get a handle on this nightmare or ignore the monstrous potential – be it the capacity for infanticide or simply careless cruelty – that lurks within all mothers.

Leila Latif, *Sight and Sound*, March 2023