



Black Debutantes: A Collection of Early Works by Black Women Directors
Woman with a Movie Camera

Mountains

Mountains

Director: Monica Sorelle

Executive Producers: Rhianon Jones,
Tristan Scott-Behrends

Producer: Robert Colom

1st Assistant Director: Juan Luis Matos

Script Supervisor: Mia Tippenhauer

Written by: Monica Sorelle, Robert Colom

Cinematography: Javier Labrador Deulofeu

Editor: Jonathan Cuartas

Production Designer: Helen Peña

Costume Designer: Waina Chancy

Music: Dyani Douze

Cast:

Atibon Nazaire (*Xavier*)

Sheila Anozier (*Esperance*)

Chris Renois (*Junior*)

Serafin Falcon (*Jorge*)

Roscoë B. Thické III (*Daniel*)

Yaniel Castillo (*Chino*)

Bechir Sylvain (*Dominique*)

Kerline Alce (*Magaly*)

USA 2023

95 mins

Digital

Woman with a Movie Camera is generously
supported by Jane Stanton

Director Monica Sorelle on 'Mountains'

The film begins with a Haitian proverb; what does that proverb mean, and what resonance does it have for you?

Proverbs are really big in Haitian culture. When we were trying to figure out the name of this film, I was looking at proverbs, and that one in the film – ‘Behind mountains, there are more mountains’ – has always been one of my favourites. It’s essentially a way to say just when you figure some shit out and went through some shit, there’s some more shit that you’re gonna have to figure out. It could also be interpreted as behind the horizon, there’s more. So it can be a positive as well. But I think, generally, there’s always something down the line. And it resonated with me because of the Sisyphean journey the working-class immigrant in America feels, where you try to roll this ball up the mountain, but there’s always something that knocks you down.

The politics of the film primarily take place on these demolition sites, where the homes that dot Miami’s Little Haiti are being destroyed in the name of gentrification. How did you find these construction sites?

We wrote this whole film around demolitions, but it was the last thing we got. We’d been shooting for two weeks, and we still didn’t have any of those locations. We had scouts going around, trying to create relationships with these people. We were trying to figure out what their schedule was so we could put that schedule on our schedule. But the nature of demolition is they might hear a day before that they got the permit, so they’re gonna go there tomorrow. It’s also very obviously a male-centric industry. We had a woman scout who they didn’t really respect all that much. Since there were so many issues with getting the locations, we started shooting without them, just hoping that eventually something would pop up.

I think, maybe, three weeks into the shoot, Robert [Colom] said, ‘I think we’re gonna just have to send everyone home, do this part of the shoot, and then separately find these demolition sites afterwards.’ But then, during the third week of shooting, on a Thursday, someone who we called weeks or months ago left a voicemail asking if we were still looking for demolitions. They had one on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. It was like magic; it sort of happened. The person who plays the excavator operator was someone we had met, and he also said he had a job next week and we could shoot him while he was working. We didn’t have any of our demolition workers because we couldn’t put them on hold. So essentially, I was on set shooting, and Robert was going into a Rolodex of actors and auditioning them on Zoom and then coming to lunch to show me the casting videos. It was a crazy turnaround.

Could you talk about the importance of this film being in Creole?

So Robert and I aren’t in the industry. We’re not from that space. Everything we’ve made has been incredibly independent and incredibly scrappy. When we were thinking about the film, it was sort of a no-brainer to us for the language to be Creole because we wanted to make a Neorealist film about a Haitian family, so why would they be speaking English in their house? That’s just not what happens. I didn’t realise, in terms of the industry, in terms of American indies, that that was subversive in some way.

But thinking about the dialogue, it turned into almost like a preservation project. Atibon was very adamant about saying certain words a certain way. I would have a way of translating things in a Haitian-American way, where the language was sort of getting warped by American tongues. He felt like this film was a way to be able to preserve actual Haitian Creole before it gets gentrified. There were words I had never heard of or phrases I wouldn’t say in a certain way that he was very adamant about. So language is really important, not only for realism, but also for ensuring the Haitian language could be shared with the world.

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Black Debutantes: A Collection of Early Works by Black Women Directors

25 & Under: Introduction to Black Debutantes

Thu 1 May 18:40 Blue Room

Pariah

Thu 1 May 20:50; Sun 25 May 18:20

UK Premiere of 4K Restoration: Will

Sat 3 May 18:10; Thu 15 May 20:30

Losing Ground

Sat 3 May 20:40 (+ pre-recorded intro by Nina Lorez Collins); Sun 11 May 15:20

Sugar Cane Alley Rue Cases-Nègres

Sun 4 May 18:10; Sat 17 May 20:40

What My Mother Told Me

Mon 5 May 14:50; Wed 21 May 20:40

Welcome II the Terrordome

Mon 5 May 18:30; Sat 17 May 12:30

Naked Acts

Thu 8 May 18:20 (+ extended season intro by Rógan Graham); Wed 14 May 18:15

Special Preview of new 4K Restoration: Compensation

Thu 8 May 20:55; Sat 24 May 18:20

Drylongso

Sun 11 May 18:45; Thu 22 May 20:30

Black Debutantes Shorts Programme: Performance Pains

Wed 14 May 20:30; Fri 30 May 18:15

A Way of Life

Fri 16 May 18:15; Tue 27 May 20:50

Exhibiting Black Cinema

Thu 22 May 18:20

UK Premiere: Test Pattern

Fri 23 May 18:40; Sat 31 May 18:10

Woman with a Movie Camera: Mountains

Thu 29 May 18:15

25 & Under

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When you talk about protecting, gentrification is such an immediate threat in the real Little Haiti and the Little Haiti of this film. How reflective is the film of the situation on the ground?

Growing up, I didn't live in Little Haiti. But it's where my mother worked and where she lived for several years when she first moved to the US, so I spent a lot of time there as a kid. When I moved back to Miami in 2014 after film school, something was off. It was really apparent. I had just seen this film called *Right to Wynwood* – it's one of the companion films to *Mountains* – it really broke down gentrification for me and explained what's going on in our neighbourhoods and how it really is a systemic process. It's incredibly planned, starting with detailed 15-year-long tracks that developers create. That film broke down the Soho model and how it was being put to work in Wynwood.

When I moved back to Miami, and I saw the same developers from that town hanging around the neighbourhood, I realised this is real. That year, I joined a nonprofit, and we'd do direct actions and protests, but unfortunately, I grasped that if everyone's hip to the gentrification that is presently happening, that means it's already too late. The wheels are in motion; the buildings have been bought behind our backs. I stopped doing organising work because I immediately became burnt out.

During that time, really awful systemic things had been happening in the city. At one point, there were these two plazas that have been there longer than I've been alive. There were thriving Haitian-owned businesses. But the buildings were sold to a developer who then raised the rent by a lot. Of course, this disturbed the longtime business owners there, but at the end of the month, they decided to make the payment and came with their rent checks. That same week, the new owner gave them back their rent checks. He was actually planning on evicting them anyways. He just didn't imagine that they would have the money to pay his new rent. The city is also chopping up Little Haiti into smaller neighbourhoods so developers can call the neighbourhoods different names like 'Little River' or 'Lemon City' instead of what it is.

I remember showing the film to friends and family back home and overhearing someone say a business in the film was gone now. Even in the year since I shot it, there are places that are gone and that are closed, and I think a year from now, it's gonna be even more stark and disturbing. People can't afford to live. I was looking for an apartment, and I can't even afford to live in Little Haiti anymore.

What do you hope people take away from this film?

Everyone approaches this film differently depending on their experience with either Miami, gentrification, or Haitian culture. I think for some, especially Haitians, it's just a joy to see themselves reflected on screen and to see people that resemble themselves, resemble their families, and resemble their dynamics. For some, it's cathartic to see a father-and-son relationship rebuilt and healed. For others, it's a slight call to action in terms of being aware of what gentrification looks like on the ground. Not in a didactic way, but in terms of the familial: who are the people that are actually affected by this?

The film asks you to take care of that knowledge, take care of your community, take care of the people that are being affected in these ways, and be mindful of how you show up. This is definitely a David versus Goliath situation, and I cannot pretend that I have any real solutions here. But I think being a very mindful, good neighbour is one step. Making sure you preserve your culture and your neighbourhood's history is another. Even though this is a specific story about Little Haiti, I think had we known 20 years ago, there could have been things done to sort of protect the citizens there. But because we were all caught off guard, we got caught in this tsunami. So there is a call to action so others can begin community organising before it's too late.

Interview by Robert Daniels (for rogerebert.com), Music Box Films press notes