



## The World of Black Film Weekend

# West Indies: The Fugitive Slaves of Liberty

+ intro by Ashley Clark

### West Indies: The Fugitive Slaves of Liberty

West Indies ou le nègres marrons de la liberté

Director: Med Hondo

Production Companies: Les Films Soleil Ô, Yanek, Ipc, R.T.A., Onmc

Production Manager: Christine Gozlan

Unit Manager: François Menny

1st Assistant Director: Jean Léon

2nd Assistant Director: Philippe Dupuis-Mendel

Screenplay: Daniel Boukman, Med Hondo

Based on the play *Les Nègrriers* by:

Daniel Boukman

Director of Photography: François Catonné

Editor: Yousef Tobni

Art Director: Jacques Saulnier

Costume Designer: Michèle Cerf

Make-up Designer: Josiane Deschamps

Music: Georges Rabol, Frank Valmont

Sound: Antoine Bonfanti

Cast:

Roland Bertin (*'Death'*)

Hélène Vincent (*social worker*)

Philippe Clévenot (*abbot*)

Robert Liensol (*member of parliament*)

Cyril Aventurin (*father*)

Fernand Berset (*hotel manager*)

Gerald Bloncourt (*Monsieur de la Pierre*)

Mauritania-Algeria-France 1979

113 mins

Digital (restoration)

*The World of Black Film: A Journey Through*

*Cinematic Blackness in 100 Films* by Ashley Clark

is available to buy in the BFI Shop

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**SIGHT AND SOUND**

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Med Hondo began his feature-filmmaking career with *Soleil Ô* (1970), a surreal tragicomedy about an African immigrant's humiliating search for work, companionship, and purpose in a racist France. After a handful of documentaries and shorts, Hondo directed his sophomore fiction feature, *West Indies: The Fugitive Slaves of Liberty* (1979), almost a decade after the release of *Soleil Ô*. The interval between films was due not to a lack of ideas but rather to Hondo's startling ambition: collaborating with Daniel Boukman on an adaptation of the playwright's *Les Nègrriers* (1971), Hondo conceived *West Indies* as a large-scale musical film – one of the first from Africa – about the origin, development, and legacy of the Caribbean slave trade, with a narrative spanning continents and centuries.

Hondo met the Martinique-born Boukman during one of the director's many sojourns to Algiers in the 1970s, a period of increased activism that included meetings with leaders of various African and Middle Eastern liberation movements. Directing *Les Nègrriers* for the Paris stage early in that decade, Hondo was attracted to Boukman's unqualified denunciation of Western imperialism as well as his critique of colonialism and slavery as logical extensions of capitalist exploitation. But the work was far from a dry lesson or a didactic harangue, and in both its theatrical and cinematic forms, Hondo realised *Les Nègrriers'* complex story as a song-and-dance extravaganza with several dozen major characters, along with hundreds of dancers and extras, that avoids lapsing into empty entertainment. As in the play, the film's political investigations – which include pointed attacks on bourgeois Africans and West Indians who colluded with their oppressors – would suffuse its musical numbers, in addition to its most striking element, a set in the form of a mock slave ship that Hondo and his production team constructed inside an abandoned Citroën factory in Paris.

Beyond representing the role of such vessels in transporting human cargo, *West Indies'* ship serves as a multipurpose soundstage for the depiction of seemingly unrelated historical events – from governmental meetings to street protests – elucidating how various social, economic, and political phenomena were entangled with the slave trade. The symbolism of the factory was deliberate: 'It's not just a matter of aesthetics,' Hondo stated in an interview. 'It is also because the product derived from the plunder of African raw material, namely man, ends up today as he did yesterday, albeit in other forms, in factories.' However, it was the film's elaborate production design that exacerbated its long gestation period. 'My problem was to raise funding,' Hondo told Guadeloupean French singer-songwriter Moune de Rivel in an on-set interview.

'I have to strive for five, let's say seven, years, and despite the assistance I received from Algerian television, I had a hard time convincing those principally interested, Africans and West Indians, to produce this kind of film.' At one point, Hondo looked to Hollywood for financing, but he ultimately turned away when both Warner Bros. and MGM demanded substantial revisions. Budgeted at \$1.3 million (at that time, the largest sum ever for an African production),

## In Person & Previews

### TV Preview: *Bridgerton* part two

+ Q&A with cast and creator (tbc)

Tue 24 Feb 18:10

### Preview: *Resurrection*

Wed 25 Feb 19:00

### Doctor Who Special Edition: *Warriors of the Deep*

+ Q&A with actors Peter Davison and

Janet Fielding

Sat 28 Feb 12:00

### Restored Special: *Gamera Trilogy*

Sat 28 Feb 16:00, 18:15, 20:40

### KINOTEKA Gala screening: *Franz*

+ Q&A with director Agnieszka Holland

Tue 3 Mar 17:30 BFI IMAX

### International Women's Day: 40th anniversary

screening: *Working Girls* + intro

Sun 8 Mar 15:15

### Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI

Mon 9 Mar 18:30 BFI IMAX

### TV Preview: *Big Mood Series 2*

+ Q&A with Cast and Creator

Tue 17 Mar 18:30

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*West Indies* eventually received further funding from RTA (Radio Télévision Algérienne), as well as Yanek Films, the Société Interafricaine de Production Cinématographique, and the Office National de Cinéma Mauritanien.

Hondo was able to secure money from the last source due, in part, to his Mauritanian roots: his mother was Mauritanian, and his father was Senegalese. When de Rivel asked why Hondo, whose heritage lay in Africa, was making a film about the history of the Caribbean, the director replied, 'Because nowadays all West Indians and Africans can claim that they share an ancestor, and from that point of view, *West Indies* imposes its story on us.' Hondo had emigrated from Morocco to Marseille in 1959. He eventually settled in Paris, and two decades in France influenced his understanding of how similar experiences of colonisation, migration, and alienation in the West had created a shared history among African and West Indian peoples. 'I've been living in France for several years, where I've come to know some West Indians,' Hondo told de Rivel. 'I learned something of their history. I visited the West Indies to discover ... a full-blown historical past. These people, whose origins are multinational, are descendants of different ethnic groups, who have had different languages, different dialects, and have invented a language, Creole, which they spread throughout the Caribbean to better understand each other; they stood up for themselves so as to keep their individual identities.' The film represents this common struggle of sundry Africans and West Indians against Western oppression through a variety of musical and dance styles – from minuet to swing and calypso – that forge a collective expression of independence and rebellion.

Hondo's plan was to enlist the tropes of popular, commercial filmmaking to smuggle in the subversive content of *West Indies* for a wide audience: 'I wanted to free the very concept of musical comedy from its American trademark. I wanted to show that each people on earth has its own musical comedy, its own musical tragedy, and its own thought shaped through its own history.' But in September 1979, the French theatrical release of *West Indies* met with negative reviews, most likely due to its scathing portrait of that country's colonial legacy. This failure dampened interest from other European markets. Six years later, a U.S. release sparked positive responses – *New York Times* critic Janet Maslin called *West Indies* 'a revolutionary musical in both senses of the word' – but the film was nonetheless seen by few moviegoers, until now.

Janus Films