Big Screen Classics

Belle

Belle
Director: Amma Asante
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A DJ Films *production*
Made with the support of: BFI Film Fund
Presented by: Fox Searchlight Pictures, Isle of Man Film, Pinewood Pictures, BFI
In association with: Head Gear Films, Metrol Technology
Released in association with: TSG Entertainment
Executive Producers: Steve Christian, Julie Goldstein, Ivan Dunleavy, Steve Norris, Phil Hunt, Compton Ross, Christopher Collins
Producer: Damian Jones
Production Co-ordinator: Alice Syed
Production Accountant: Peter Eardley
Unit Managers: David Bell, Jim Edge
Location Managers: Adam Richards, Sian Sutherland
Post-production Supervisor: Michael Solinger
1st Assistant Director: Martin Curry
2nd Assistant Director: Ben Harrison
Crowd Second Assistant Director: Guy Campbell
3rd Assistant Director: Tussy Facchin
Script Supervisor: Sue Hills
Written by: Misan Sagay
Director of Photography: Ben Smithard
'B' Camera Operator/Steadicam: Xandy Sahla
'A' Camera Focus Puller: Catherine Brown
'A' Camera Clapper Loader: Sashi Kisoon
Digital Imaging Technician: Natalie Theobald
Visual Effects by: BlueBolt
Visual Effects Supervisors: Henry Badgett, Clare Norman
Visual Effects Producer: Priyanka Balasubramanian
Special Effects Supervisor: Chris Reynolds
Editors: Pia Di Ciaula, Victoria Boydell
Production Designer: Simon Bowles
Supervising Art Director: Ben Smith
Art Director: Claudio Campana
Set Decorator: Tina Jones
Property Master: Allen Polley
Construction Managers: Gene D'Cruze, Graham Thomas
Costume Designer: Anushia Nieradzik
Make-up and Hair Designer: Marese Langan
Key Make-up Artist: Beverley Binda
Key Hair Stylist: Christopher Redman
Title Design: Matt Curtis
Digital Intermediate Colourist: Gareth Spensley
Music by: Rachel Portman
Music Performed by:
The City of Prague Philharmonic Orchestra
Conducted by: David Snell
Orchestrations: Youki Yamamoto
Sound Designer: Robert Ireland
Production Sound Mixer: Alistair Crocker
Sound Re-recording Mixers: Brendon Nicholson, Andrew Caller
Supervising Sound Editor: Lee Herrick
Foley Mixer: Luke Brown
Digital Intermediate by: Molinare TV and Film Ltd
Cast:
Gugu Mbatha-Raw *(Dido Elizabeth Belle)*
Tom Wilkinson *(Lord Mansfield)*
Sam Reid *(John Davinier)*
Sarah Gadon *(Lady Elizabeth Murray)*
Miranda Richardson *(Lady Ashford)*
Penelope Wilton *(Lady Mary Murray)*
Tom Felton *(James Ashford)*

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away some of the plot.

When Captain Sir John Lindsay returns to his young daughter Dido Belle after the death of her mother, a former slave, he proffers his love and care in the form of chocolate. This small gift represents a greater one: Lindsay recognises Dido as the legitimate heir to his name and fortune – a singular act in 1769 Britain, which, as the opening titles remind us, was 'a colonial empire and slave trading centre'. The sweet mixture of sugar and cocoa from the colonies that Lindsay gives to his daughter is like the film's use of costume drama: simultaneously drawing the viewer in and critiquing the 'chocolate box' style of the genre and its literary sources by revealing the bitter ingredients on which they depend.

The film opens with young Dido being laced into a corset; director Amma Asante neither casts out costume drama's textural, architectural beauty in favour of the gritty approach of her first feature *A Way of Life* (2004), nor casts it at odds with a protagonist of colour. Rather, as the film's title implies, beauty flows from and around Dido. With grace and assurance, Gugu Mbatha-Raw's performance as the adult Dido centres the film, as vividly mobile as the depiction of the historical Dido Lindsay and her cousin Elizabeth Murray in the portrait, attributed to Johann Zoffany, that inspired the film. The painting is reputedly the first to depict a Black subject sharing an equal eyeline with a white subject.

While putting Dido front and centre, Asante highlights the female relationships that are key to the genre, not only between the two cousins but also with the older women – their great-aunts Lady Mansfield and Lady Mary Murray, and the family's London maid Mabel – who mother the motherless girls. As the film transforms the young Dido and Elizabeth into their older selves with an apparently seamless shot of them running around a tree, it also nods to the maze in Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1992) and through it to a matrilineage of critical heritage dramas by Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Julie Dash, Jane Campion, Patricia Rozema, Mira Nair and Andrea Arnold.

As in those films, in a clever twist on the Bechdel test, Asante shows that it is through talking about marriage and men that the female protagonists of costume drama are able to articulate a political philosophy, culminating here when Elizabeth states: 'We are but their property.' Through the cousins' entanglement with the socially superior but spendthrift Ashford family, Asante frankly depicts the classist, racist and sexist violence that contours the romantic fantasy. Dido's insistence, even in the face of Oliver Ashford's self-interested proposal and his brother James's attempted sexual assault, that she is entitled to romance revivifies love as a structuring principle for her story, as does her eventual choice of beau. The son of a poor parish priest, John Davinier is a radical abolitionist clerking for Dido's great-uncle Lord Mansfield, and the first person to see Dido as embodying her mother's beauty rather than her father's wealth.

When Davinier reveals to Dido the facts of the *Zong* case, on which Mansfield is sitting, she risks participation in a public as well as an intimate drama. The story of the *Zong* – a slave traders' ship whose captain had his human cargo thrown overboard when supplies of water ran low – shocks Dido into a

James Norton *(Oliver Ashford)*
Matthew Goode *(Captain Sir John Lindsay)*
Emily Watson *(Lady Mansfield)*
Lauren Julien-Box *(young Dido)*
Natasha Williams *(poor woman)*
Alan McKenna *(Harry)*
Cara Jenkins *(young Elizabeth)*
Timothy Walker *(Wimbridge)*
David Gant *(Zoffany)*
Charlotte Roach *(maid at Kenwood House)*
Rupert Wickham *(Reverend Davinier)*
Bethan Mary-James *(Mabel)*
Alana Ramsey *(maid at Ashford House)*
Alex Jennings *(Lord Ashford)*
Daniel Wilde *(gentleman)*
Susan Brown *(Baroness Vernon)*
James Northcote *(Mr Vaughn)*
Andrew Woodall *(Lord Mayor)*
Edmund Short *(law student)*
Christopher Middleton *(court clerk)*
USA-UK 2013©
104 mins
Digital

realisation of her anomalous position and its privileges. Making use of them, she hands Davinier papers that Mansfield has suppressed, in which the *Zong*'s first mate confesses the slaves were thrown overboard as an insurance scam.

This inextricable intertwining of love and justice, private and public, personal and political, is the film's great *cri de coeur* and its structural brilliance, as costume and courtroom drama comment on, and merge into, each other. The film argues that Mansfield's judgement, which found against the slavers and historically marked the beginning of the end of British slavery, must have been affected by the presence – forceful and articulate here – of his ward. Following her pivotal role in her great-uncle's change of heart, Dido's proposal to Davinier outside the Inns of Court after Mansfield's verdict is akin to Cornel West's assertion that 'justice is what love looks like in public'.

'I have been blessed with freedom twice over, as a Negro and as a woman,' Dido tells Davinier, drawing an implicit line between the 18th century's revolutionary notions of individual liberty and the civil-rights movements of the 20th. While Dido means, on the surface, that her legitimacy and inheritance have freed her from the constraints of her skin colour and gender, the statement suggests an exhilarating realisation: that it is from her marginalised position that she (and we) can have our chocolate and eat it, revelling in the film's gorgeous awareness of what freedom truly means.

So Mayer, *Sight and Sound*, July 2014

Big Screen Classics

A Dry White Season
Mon 2 Nov 18:20; Wed 25 Nov 18:10
Babymother Tue 3 Nov 21:15; Mon 16 Nov 18:15
Yaaba Wed 4 Nov 18:10 (+ intro by Awa Konaté, Founder of Culture Art Society); Fri 20 Nov 20:40
Crooklyn Thu 5 Nov 14:40; Mon 9 Nov 18:00; Sat 21 Nov 20:30
Touki Bouki Fri 6 Nov 18:15; Thu 19 Nov 20:40
Pressure Sat 7 Nov 20:30; Fri 27 Nov 14:40
Young Soul Rebels Sun 8 Nov 18:20
Bamako Tue 10 Nov 20:30
Daughters of the Dust
Wed 11 Nov 18:10 (+ intro by Rógan Graham, BFI Film Programmer); Sat 28 Nov 15:00
Burning an Illusion Thu 12 Nov 20:50
Mandabi Fri 13 Nov 21:00; Sun 29 Nov 12:10
The Watermelon Woman
Sat 14 Nov 20:40; Wed 18 Nov 18:15 (+ intro by Grace Barber-Plentie, BFI Festivals Programmer)
Belle Sun 15 Nov 18:20; Thu 26 Nov 20:40
A Screaming Man Tue 17 Nov 20:55
Tongues Untied + pre-recorded intro by writer Jason Okundaye
Sun 22 Nov 12:10
Yeelen Mon 23 Nov 20:30; Mon 30 Nov 18:10
Ganja and Hess
Tue 24 Nov 18:10 (+ intro by Gabriel Leavey, film curator, presenter and BFI Studio Coordinator)

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