Big Screen Classics

Yaaba

Yaaba
Director: Idrissa Ouédraogo
Production Companies: Arcadia Films, Les Films de l'Avenir, Thelma Film AG
Co-production: Télévision Suisse Romande, ZDF - Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen, La Sept
Financial Assistance: La Fondation GAN pour le cinéma
Participation: La Direction du Cinéma du Burkina Faso, Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, Ministère Français de la Coopération, Department Fédéral de l'Interieur (Switzerland), Département Fédéral des Affaires Etrangères
Executive Producers: Pierre Alain Meier, Freddy Denaës
Producer: Idrissa Ouédraogo *
Associate to the Producer: Pierre-André Thiébaud
Unit Production Manager: Aouba Drissa
Unit Managers: Baba Ouedraogo, Karim Sawadogo
Collaborators: Awa Drabo, Elizabeth Adriato, Justine Adriato, Pascal Zongo, Pascal Sama, Isso Soro, Boureima Nonguerma, Adama Kinda, Issaka Ouedraogo, Robert Kabre, Yacouba Ouedraogo
Assistant to the Director: Paul Zoumbara, Ismaël Ouédraogo
Trainee Assistant Director: Jean-Claude Bandé
Script Supervisor: Virginie Barbay
Screenplay: Idrissa Ouédraogo
Director of Photography: Matthias Kälin
Camera Operator: Jean Monsigny
Camera Assistants: Moussa Kémoko Diakité, Benoît Nicoulin
Trainee Camera Assistant: Paul Djibila
Supervising Gaffer: André Pinkus
Electrician: Kibili Diallo
Key Grip: Urs Bühler
Grips: Abel Nada, René Dabira, Issa Traoré
Stills Photography: Freddy Denaës, Roger Meier, Célestin Zongo
Editor: Loredana Cristelli
Assistant Editors: Christoph Germann, Nicole Meuris
Costumer: Mariam Sidibé
Make-up: Nathalie Tanner, Aminata Zouré
Titles: Arane
Grading: Christian Rever
Music: Francis Bébey
Sound: Jean-Paul Mugel
Assistant Sound: Laurent Poirier, Issa Traoré
Mixer: Dominique Dalmasso
Sound Effects: Jacky Kretz
Technical Consultant: Sekou Ouédraogo
Cast:
Fatima Sanga (Sana/Yaaba)
Noufou Ouédraogo (Bila)
Roukietou Barry (Nopoko)
Adama Ouédraogo (Kougri)
Amade Toure (Tibo)
Sibidou Ouédraogo (Poko)
Adame Sidibe (Razougou)
Rasmané Ouédraogo (Noaga)
Kinda Moumouni (Finse)
Assita Ouédraogo (Koudi)
Zenabou Ouédraogo (Pegda)
Ousmane Sawadogo (Taryam)
Burkina Faso 1989
90 mins
Digital (restoration)

Restored by thelmafilm

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

A contemporary review

It might seem remarkable for Burkina Faso, one of the poorest countries in Africa, to have a film industry, and yet five Burkinabe films were shown at the recent Pan African film festival. And it is not in any way to detract from Idrissa Ouédraogo's *Yaaba* to suggest that it has partly attracted international attention on this score. The other source of *Yaaba*'s appeal, however, is its capacity to evoke universal truths by recounting simple events and so to transcend the confines of village, state or even continent.

The 'Yaaba' or grandmother of the title is honorary – 'No one has ever called me that before,' she says to young Bila who gives her this affectionate nickname. They are not related. Indeed, Yaaba is a village outcast, a wizened, sun-dried old woman who keeps her distance from the cluster of mud huts that form Bila's village and who is widely believed to be a witch of some kind. Ignoring their families' injunctions to stay clear, Bila and his cousin Nopoko strike up a friendship with the old lady which is based on the special empathy that often arises between the very old and the very young. This friendship stands them in good stead when, after a fight with some other children, Nopoko is stabbed with a rusty knife and contracts tetanus. Through Bila's intercession, Yaaba is finally allowed, after other remedies have failed, to introduce her friend the healer to the village and Nopoko is cured.

Of course, part of the fear she inspires is fear of her knowledge, which derives both from her age and her habitation. Hovering just outside the village that excludes her, she is well placed to see the comings and goings others do not see. In particular, the fact that Kougri has become exasperated with her alcoholic husband and has finally succumbed to the advances of Razougou. Everyone knows she owed her husband loyalty, but 'we should not judge her,' says Yaaba, 'she has her reasons.' In this way, the old woman becomes an otherworldly presence, a serene contrast to the domestic interactions in the village which, though they are observed with considerable affection and humour, are essentially trivial: the women usually retire in mock offence to their huts until they get their own way.

Much of the village business in fact concerns matters of life and death, the arranging of marriages, a wedding party, the fear that Nopoko may die, yet all these things are made relative by Yaaba's distant and somehow timeless overview. The film is structured in such a way as to suggest the cycle of life, death and renewal. It opens and closes with the identical shot of children running away from the camera across the dusty landscape, a shot which at the beginning of the film is followed, and at the end is preceded, by an episode where they tend a grave. The fact that at the end of the film the grave is Yaaba's points not to the end of the lifecycle so much as the end of the narrative, the implication being that there is a resemblance between filmmaker and Yaaba that is based on distance or wisdom or both.

This, in turn, introduces another aspect of *Yaaba* which is both worrying and appealing. Ouédraogo's slightly distanced and affectionate view of his compatriots may be explained by the fact that he is already in his mid-thirties

Big Screen Classics

Burning an Illusion
Mon 19 Oct 18:20; Tue 27 Oct 14:40;
Thu 12 Nov 20:50
Young Soul Rebels
Tue 20 Oct 20:50; Sat 24 Oct 20:40;
Sun 8 Nov 18:20
Pressure
Wed 21 Oct 18:05 (+ intro by Xavier Alexandre Pillai, BFI TV Programmer); Sat 7 Nov 20:30;
Fri 27 Nov 14:40
Mandabi
Thu 22 Oct 14:40; Fri 13 Nov 21:00;
Sun 29 Nov 12:10
A Dry White Season
Fri 23 Oct 20:40; Mon 2 Nov 18:20;
Wed 25 Nov 18:10
Babymother
Sun 25 Oct 12:40; Tue 3 Nov 21:15;
Mon 16 Nov 18:15
Bamako
Mon 26 Oct 18:10; Tue 10 Nov 20:30
Tongues Untied + pre-recorded intro by writer Jason Okundaye
Wed 28 Oct 18:45; Sun 22 Nov 12:10
A Screaming Man
Thu 29 Oct 18:20; Tue 17 Nov 20:55
Ganja and Hess
Fri 30 Oct 20:30; Tue 24 Nov 18:10 (+ intro by Gabriel Leavey, film curator, presenter and BFI Studio Coordinator)
Daughters of the Dust
Sat 31 Oct 18:10; Wed 11 Nov 18:10 (+ intro by Rógan Graham, BFI Film Programmer);
Sat 28 Nov 15:00
Belle
Sun 1 Nov 15:10; Sun 15 Nov 18:20;
Thu 26 Nov 20:40
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
The Watermelon Woman
Sat 14 Nov 20:40; Wed 18 Nov 18:15 (+ intro by Grace Barber-Plentie, BFI Festivals Programmer)
Yeelen
Mon 23 Nov 20:30; Mon 30 Nov 18:10

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SIGHT AND SOUND

(not a beginner, therefore) but, more important, by the long training that took him first to Kiev and later to the IDHEC film school in Paris. Like many other African filmmakers – Ousmane Sembène springs to mind – he has benefited from the cultural aid with which France has bolstered her post-imperialist presence in Africa. Further. more, Ouédraogo was not merely trained in France, but he also raised the money for this film from European, and especially Swiss, sources, something for which he has been strongly criticised by other African filmmakers. This has simultaneously ensured adequate distribution for *Yaaba* and allowed it production values acceptable to European cinema and television.

But it has also made the film strangely anachronistic. Watching *Yaaba* is like opening one of Jean de Brunhoff's stories of Babar the Elephant and seeing the colonial experience schematised, sanitised and narrated with affectionate comedy for the amusement of European children. There, as it were, are all the trappings we expect: the oasis, the river to bathe in, the circular houses built from mud, the costumes, the dances, the old lady who is both faith healer and guru. It is the studied innocence, above all, which is part of the charm of both this film and of Babar, lifting them both literally outside time.

There is something both very accomplished and very odd about a capacity to look at one's own country so dispassionately and to adopt the style and manners of an outsider. The literary genre was popular in the eighteenth century and *Yaaba* is a not-too-distant descendant of it, hence the classicism of its narrative. However, in this case the relationship between looker and looked-at is not neutral, for in order to portray his people thus Ouédraogo has had to adopt the coloniser's point of view.

Are we therefore to assimilate the filmmaker and the wise old woman, as the film implies, making the observer's point of view one of knowledge to which the youngsters aspire? Conversely, do we consider that the African filmmaker has a particularly contradictory role to play in attempting to valorise the simple and the universal by means of the most sophisticated of tools? Looked at in this way *Yaaba* becomes an even more fascinating film, both a moving and accomplished narrative of life in a poor African village and a poignant image of modernisation.

Jill Forbes, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1990