

# Haiti ? Cinema Revival

Charles Arthur

A remarkable event took place in a small south coast town in Haiti in July 2004. Over ten days from 9 July, the first Jacmel film festival featured 195 projections of 85 films shown free-of-charge at six different venues, including a large open-air public space for night-time screenings. More than 20 directors attended, with delegations travelling from as far as France and Spain, as well as Cuba, Jamaica and the United States, and some of these visiting directors hosted workshops on various aspects of film-making.

The staging of the event was remarkable for several reasons, not least that it happened at a time when the country was still experiencing significant political upheaval in the aftermath of the overthrow of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide and his government at the end of February 2004. The implementation of the concept owed much to the courage and determination of the festival's two main organisers, the Jacmel native, Patrick Boucard, and the US-born resident, David Belle.

Boucard, an artist from a notable local family, recently returned to his home-town after years studying and working abroad. In October 2003, he and his wife opened the Jacmel Art Centre in a converted coffee warehouse on the seafront. Belle visited Haiti for the first time in 1993 while filming a documentary about the military coup regime in power at that time. He subsequently decided to stay on and relocated to a village outside Jacmel, from where he has made a series of documentaries.

The festival benefited too from the absence of politically-motivated violence in Jacmel which remained relatively tranquil while much of the rest of the country was convulsed by clashes between protestors and police, and attacks on police stations by rebel forces.

As Belle explained to one of the numerous foreign journalists who covered the event, 'There's never been a proper film festival in Haiti, and never anything on this scale.' The US\$125,000 costs, which were met partly by Boucard's own money but mainly relied on funds supplied by corporate sponsors, foundations and friends, were high because the organisers were determined that the films would be free so as to enable as many people as possible to view them. The vast majority of Haitians exist on an income of little more than a dollar or two a day, and spare cash for entertainment is an extreme rarity.

For Boucard, the idea of accessibility was a key one. He said, 'We're trying to get as many people to see (the festival) as possible. We'd like to change their idea of films, to show them that films are more than action movies.'

## Capacity audiences

In the event, the public response ? an estimated daily audience of around 3,500 people over the ten days ? was hailed by the festival organisers as 'overwhelmingly positive'. The New York-based photojournalist, Tequila Minsky, who attended the festival, said that venues for nearly all the screenings were full, and that the audiences were keenly attentive and engaged. Over the two weekends of the festival, many visitors came from the capital, Port-au-Prince, a two and a half-hour drive, and all the hotels and restaurants were reportedly full to overflowing.

During the week though, it was local people who filled the audiences. 'Every night the main street of Jacmel, which was blocked to traffic, showed two or three films on a huge screen', Minsky recalled. 'The street was always full with curious Jacmelians'.

Local people were thrilled in particular to see documentaries featuring local people. At one screening at the town's French Institute building, the well-known Jacmelian Vodou priestess,

Madame Nerval, viewed the 1999 documentary about her and her life made by the French director, Charles Najman. Another notable instance of participation was the screening of *La Vi Ka Bel Pou Tout Moun* (Life Can Be Beautiful for Everyone), directed by the Haitian, Laurence Magloire. The documentary – which is a compilation of testimonies of the stigma experienced by those trying to live a full life with HIV/AIDS – was followed by a discussion involving a woman in the film who fielded questions from audience.

For many in the audiences, these were the first films they had ever seen. Jacmel's only cinema closed down several years ago, and there are few theatres in any towns other than the capital. Boucard stressed that one of the aims of the festival was 'to show films to people who have never seen movies before?', and to this end, he and Belle even commissioned two taxis to drive into the surrounding countryside to bring people into town. Minsky remembers one example, 'The two films about HIV/AIDS were viewed by an audience that included a group of 20 teenagers who were brought in from the remote fishing village of Cayes-Jacmel', she said. 'That's an hour's drive along the coastal road to the east of Jacmel.'

In a country where official estimates of adult literacy are around 50% but those involved in the limited number of non-governmental literacy campaigns cite a figure of 20%, film has obvious merits as a vehicle for ideas and information. A further obstacle to communications, even by use of cinema, is the linguistic barrier experienced by the vast majority of the population whose only language is Creole – the educated elite traditionally communicate in French, thereby effectively excluding an estimated 90% of the population.

The first film drama made in Creole – and one that was shown at the Jacmel festival – was Rassoul Labuchin's *Anita*. Made in 1980, it tells the story of a young servant girl who leaves Haiti's countryside to work for a rich family in Port-au-Prince. *Anita* was one of the first Haitian films to assert a cinematic language rooted in the recurring themes of Haitian culture: the rural exodus, domestic life, class relations and the significance of Vodou.

Despite the example of *Anita*, during the 1970s and 80s most Haitian films remained what Haitian director and producer, Richard Senecal, described as 'intellectual films', ones inaccessible to the larger population. In part this was a consequence of the brutally repressive Duvalier dictatorship that forced many aspiring directors into exile. The dictatorship would not tolerate the few films made by those who stayed if they appealed to the masses.

### **Using the Creole language**

Films made by foreign directors and producers would have been able to escape the strict censorship but few, if any, used the Creole language. Leah Gordon, is a British film-maker, who co-directed the 1997 documentary, *A Pig's Tale* about the 1973 eradication of the country's entire pig population, a probably unnecessary response to an outbreak of swine fever which delivered a terrible blow to the rural economy and the two-thirds of the population who worked in it.

Asked why her original intention to make a Creole-language version for screening in Haiti never happened, she replied, 'The film was funded by British and French television companies, and they weren't interested in a Creole version. We couldn't find the money. It was as simple as that.' However Gordon is proud to relate that although the voice-over is not in Creole most of the dialogue is, and as French or English sub-titles are used, there would still have been much to engage the Creole-speakers who viewed the film when it was shown at the Jacmel festival.

Clearly the only answer is for cinema made by Haitians for Haitians, and the Association of Haitian Filmmakers issued a special communiqué to commend the Jacmel Festival for being an important incentive to the local film industry. The president of the association is Arnold Antonin, a pioneer of politically motivated cinema, who spent 23 years in exile in Europe and Venezuela. He returned to Haiti in 1986, and since then has helped nurture a new wave of Haitian directors by

organising film shows at the centre he runs in the Port-au-Prince suburb of Petionville.

In a recent interview with the Associated Press Antonin said, "Our cinema is embryonic, but full of potential. Haitians don't want to be invisible. They want to see themselves and their problems portrayed on the screen."

Antonin claims that the digital camera has transformed filmmaking in Haiti in recent decades. He told the Miami Herald, "Before there were no financial means to produce movies in Haiti. Film was expensive in itself and you had to have it developed in a lab overseas." The advent of cheaper technology coincided with massive increases in the urban population creating a vastly enlarged potential audience. Director Reginald Lubin took advantage of this conjuncture when, in late 2001, he released his digital-video feature *La Peur d'Aimer* (The Fear of Loving), about a young woman's unplanned pregnancy. This film's sensational success was due in no small measure to its use of techniques such as good cinematography and a strong script that up until then had been largely absent from Haitian cinema.

In the wake of Lubin's success, other filmmakers began to follow suit.

After making a series of documentaries, Antonin Antonin tackled his first feature-length film in 2001. The satirical comedy, *Piwoli and the Gangster*, with a script written by Gary Victor, one of Haiti's most prominent novelists, was released to critical and popular acclaim in 2002, and was one of the hits of the Jacmel festival. It was shot in two weeks but took three months to edit because of Haiti's notoriously unreliable electricity supply.

Another director featured in Jacmel, and who is making waves in the rest of Haiti, is Senecal. He has recently made two very popular feature films, *Barikad*, the 2002 feature about the problematic relationship between a servant maid and the son of the head of the house, and another problematic romance, *I Love You Anne* (2003).

For Seneca, the problems of raising finance for Haitian-made films remains pressing. He told the Miami Herald, "Banks and other businesses, obvious choices as prospective financiers, rarely invest in films. And when they do, they demand that the filmmakers feature their businesses in the storyline."

The other constraint is the limited size of the Haitian cinema-going audience. There are, according to one estimate, just 100,000 Haitians out of a population of over eight million who can afford to go to the cinema. Bearing in mind that patrons pay 60 Haitian gourdes – about US\$1.50 at today's exchange rate – at a top cinema such as the Imperial in Port-au-Prince, and about 50 US cents at others, there is clearly little in the way of a profit margin. The decline of the Haitian economy over recent decades has hit the industry badly, with seven theatres closing down, leaving only four open in a city with a population of around two million people.

In this context, subsidised film festivals in provincial towns like the one held in Jacmel in 2004 can provide an essential boost to both existing directors, and to those who might be inspired to creativity in this medium in the future. Boucard and Belle are vowing to try and repeat their success in 2005, with a longer-term plan to get government support to turn it into a regular annual event.

Charles Arthur is a specialist on Caribbean politics and economics, a correspondent for Latinamerica Press, and a contributor for the Economist Intelligence Unit. Following his first trip to Haiti in 1993 when he served as a human rights monitor for the United Nations, he has returned to that country many times. Since 1994, he has been the main consultant for the UK-based Haiti Support Group, a development education and solidarity organisation. He is co-editor, with Michael Dash, of "*Libète: A Haiti Anthology*" (1999), and his most recent book is "*Haiti in Focus: a guide to the people, politics and culture*" (2002).