

**STRAND
RELEASING**

presents

FÉLICITÉ

A FILM BY ALAIN GOMIS

Starring Véro Tshanda Beya, Papi Mpaka and Gaetan Claudia

PRESS NOTES

Official Selection:

Berlin International Film Festival 2017

Winner: Grand Jury Prize (Silver Bear)

New York Film Festival 2017

Toronto International Film Festival 2017

Country of Origin: France/Belgium/Senegal/Germany/Lebanon

Format: DCP/1.77/Color

Sound Format: 5.1 Dolby Digital

Running Time: 123 minutes

Genre: Drama/Music

Not Rated

In Lingala and French with English Subtitles

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<http://www.strandreleasing.com/films/felicite/>

SYNOPSIS

Félicité follows a proud, free-willed woman working as a singer in a bar in Kinshasa. Her life is thrown into turmoil when her 14 year-old son falls victim to an accident. To save him, she sets out on a breakneck race through the streets of electric Kinshasa - a world of music and dreams where she'll cross paths with Tabu...

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR ALAIN GOMIS

What first made you want to make *Félicité*, what was the genesis? To write a film about a woman, to shoot a film in Kinshasa, to film music?

I feel that a film is created over years, and by summoning a multitude of different things. At the origin of this one are real people, women I'm close to – mainly in Senegal. Strong women who don't accept compromise, who tackle everything head on and refuse to give in no matter what. I had a certain admiration for this rectitude while, at the same time, reflecting on the notion of bending life to one's will. So I was interested in this dialectic of struggle and acceptance that is a theme common to all of my films. On top of that, a young cousin I'm very close to had an accident and, as a result of inadequate medical care, lost his leg. I'll never forget his expression: a 17-year-old kid who'd lost all sense of levity – for whom life was as good as over. His story was also tied to that of his mother, who was suspected of shady dealings. This simple reality that confronts the invisible on a daily basis is the foundation of the film. So I had intended a kind of Faust... then I discovered the music of Kasai Allstars, which captured all of that.

Is this the first time that a female character is the central figure in one of your films?

I really wanted to work on a female character without it being about cinematic desire. I wanted to go in the opposite direction of all my previous films, which are centered on men. Those male characters resemble me closely and I wanted to be less in control this time, to go into new territory and invite a kind of strangeness. That also led me toward a very different kind of performance.

To that point, how did you go about casting the actress Véro Tshanda Beya?

One day, while watching a Kasai Allstars video, I saw this incredible singer, Muambuyi, with her raw side and the texture of her voice... and everything came together. She made it possible for me to imagine a story about the daily struggle of a female character in situations where life is costly but who, thanks to music, is able to see the other side. After that, I went to meet her, but she was too old for the role I'd written. So I started to look for the one who could play her, and then Tshanda came along. I only recently found out that she'd done a little bit of theatre. I remember her showing up in a flashy outfit wearing lots of make-up. I'd initially considered her for a small role, but she gave off so much energy that I asked her to come back - without all of the artifice. And little by little, she began to establish her presence. For four or five months, I tried to resist her, telling myself she wasn't the one, that she was too young, too pretty; but as soon as I watched the tests, I was magnetized. So one month before we started filming, I finally accepted her. She sort of did a hold up on the film and that was a gift, because I've rarely dealt with that kind of power. During the entire casting phase, she never stopped showing a desire, a vital determination and a great understanding for acting.

Her character has that same determination. What did you tell her about *Félicité*? And how did you yourself see her character, beyond that of the “strong woman”?

Tshanda kept telling me that this was a woman who was “half alive, and half dead”. All her life, she’d stood straight, facing the world; but with her son’s accident came defeat. All the things she’d managed to keep at a distance until then fell apart. For her, the question was: “Is this life worth it – do I stay here or do I go back to where I came from?” Her character walks the line between these two options. It was obvious that Tshanda absolutely understood this possibility of renunciation. Then, I don’t say much about a character to an actor. I try to remain very concrete about the situation, but that was the kind of line that we defined. What mattered to me was the question of returning to life. How would she be able to let life find its way back in after such a fall? When you fall, when you hit the bottom, life grabs hold of every opportunity and that’s something that I find fascinating. Considering my age and the various societies in which I live, it seemed important to me to dive in, to go to the bottom. There is a form of avoidance or blindness in the face of catastrophe that was painful to me. We can’t talk about hope if we don’t grapple with real difficulty, if we don’t face it completely. Talking about brighter tomorrows is inevitably a lie, a salve. At some point you have to go for it, grapple with the present, the moment, and go down into the hole. I felt sure that at the bottom of the abyss there were the seeds of new possibility. We experienced that together.

And Kinshasa was the ideal setting for exploring that?

It’s a city that I didn’t know before, but that had always attracted me as much as it frightened me. Like a place of potential renewal or definitive defeat. It’s an extremely contradictory place. Close to the Equator, Nature has incredible strength and covers everything very quickly. You are confronted with an energy that dominates you and with which you must deal. Then, the recent political history of the Democratic Republic of Congo, over the last one hundred years, has gone through destruction after destruction: from an insane colonization to a dictatorship, from a dictatorship to war, disruptions, looting. There is this paradox of immense underground wealth at the same time as terrible poverty. Kinshasa is a city where infrastructures have exploded under demographic pressure. And there is the fake article in the constitution – Article 15 – saying “you’re on your own”, which has become a popular proverb. It seemed to me that these characters, without any structure to support them, had the strength of almost mythological characters. Left to their own devices, with no buffer around them. I had characters who were naked and, as a result, who had rare strength. Kinshasa is nothing more than our world.

How does one shoot a film in such a chaotic city?

It’s a city like any other, with its ins and outs. What is key is always having the right adviser on site. Thanks to Dieudo Hamadi, a young and brilliant Congolese documentary maker, I was put in touch with Roger Kangudia, a location manager and producer who was able to take me everywhere, roaming the city to find the various places where I’d pictured the film. The heart of the possibility of a film in this kind of situation resides in the location management and executive production - in this particular instance, Oumar Sall, the Senegalese co-producer. If they’re well connected, know how to get around in the various locations where we’d like to film, if they know how to talk and get people involved in the film... Then we can shoot anywhere. It’s almost the same thing as filming in Paris, except that the terms are sometimes different. We try to remain accessible to get as much of what happens as possible, to never play against, to remain attentive. You always have someone from the intelligence service at your side, and a powerful bureaucracy with which you need to be able to dialogue. You also have people who are

often recalcitrant toward the camera because they are wary about the image conveyed, so you have to talk to them. You're filming using the city – it's the city that makes the film.

Did music have an influence on your choosing Kinshasa?

Yes. It really came with Kasai Allstars, which is a conglomerate of four or five different groups. It's both traditional music and music that has become urbanized, that smells of grease and the forest. Transcendental, electric, almost rock or electro. This music links tradition with modernity and, as I see it, embodies the African city.

Were the members of Kasai Allstars immediately receptive to the project?

I went to meet with them, one group after the other, to talk to them about the film and they showed a lot of interest and curiosity. It was pretty simple, and we were able to work with their label, Crammed Discs. Muambuyi, the singer, coached Tshanda and was generous enough to let her take her place, lend her voice, and teach her the songs and how to dance... We filmed the songs both live and in playback over several nights and over very long durations. All over Kinshasa there was an enormous desire, the energy to create, to build. You might think the people would have become sluggish from being kicked around for so long, but instead you find an insane construction force. By the way, it's no coincidence that it's one of the rare places in Africa where you can find a symphony orchestra!

When you suddenly hear the orchestra begin “Fratres” by Arvo Pärt, you feel a genuine sense of elevation.

When I arrived in Kinshasa, my first reaction was “when do I get out of here”, but the city managed to grab hold of me, and that's something I've tried to transcribe, to make sure that this initially repulsive image becomes endearing. So, on one of the first days, while I was contemplating how to show the reality of this city on screen, I contacted the orchestra, which I knew about thanks to a documentary. I arrived in a hangar, took a seat, and they started to play. I was absolutely exhausted and, suddenly, I was lifted away. It's an amateur orchestra, but there is an incredible power in their playing. It's that perpetual movement between resignation, scandal and reconciliation with life. Life hits hard, crushes. And people like them maintain the belief that reconciliation is possible.

Do you have any role models gleaned from fiction, literature or mythology?

Saul Williams – who played the lead role in Tey – gave me a book by the Nigerian poet and author Ben Okri entitled *The Famished Road* which talks about the initiatory journey of a young boy, Azaro, a “spirit-child”. Spirit children refuse to live on Earth and make an eternal pact to choose to die as quickly as possible in order to return to their marvelous world. One day, Azaro decides to break from the pact and confront the reality of the world. In *The Blue Bird* by Maeterlinck, we also find souls waiting to be incarnated, some of whom are hesitant. Falling into a body, falling into a story, into a context that you endure. This strangeness from oneself so powerfully present in fairytales is something very familiar to me and with which I constantly dialogue. It is, in part, the foundation of my desire, my cinematic domain.

Does questioning this otherness come from a need?

I experience it in a very powerful way. Does it come from being mixed race? That is to say, not looking like those who are close to me, not looking like my father or my mother, or people from my countries. This strangeness from oneself is something I need to assert. I believe the doubt as to our core identity is clearly more widespread than we claim. Therein is a kind of abyss that I'm inclined to find wonderful.

Let's go back to the structure of the film. In the first part, the story relies on a well-tested narrative standard: the main character has a limited amount of time to find a certain amount of money to save her son's leg. And yet, this trajectory is pretty quickly interrupted and the film embarks upon a different timeline with a narrative mode that is more lax. Was this contrasted structure always the plan?

Initially, I was determined to be able to talk to the broadest audience possible, and to make it possible for the viewers resembling my characters to enter the film easily. So I give them the codes they are familiar with and insist on the motivation of a character with whom they can identify. If I push that to the limit, what the film is going to say won't be of any interest to me. Cinematic grammar, which is now extremely conditioned by modes of production, always involves some kind of discourse. As a manufacturer, these dominant codes, which are highly political, don't work for me because they always lead to the transcription of the same image of the world. When you're dealing with this kind of story, the challenge is: how does the character pull through? Resolution always begins the moment they get out of their environment. For me, that assertion is a lie coupled with a huge kind of oppression. Not being able to love one's life is one of the greatest forms of violence there is, and one in which film participates. Our incessant fascination with an ideal world, a world promised only to a select few, is an insistence on self-hatred. I try to depict life as I experience it, reclaiming heroes whose sole objective is not Escape. These lives aren't cheap; they are beautiful and dignified. Félicité needs to lose everything in order to let herself be loved. On the other hand, I'm in favor of giving a sense of time and emotions in line with what we experience. I prefer trying to slip in between the various established notions of dramatic acknowledgements. That's where things happen, in the silences, in a certain kind of inefficiency. When you watch a film, it doesn't take place on the screen, it takes place inside of you. I'm not saying that I manage to do that, but that's what I'm interested in.

You use the terms silence and inefficiency. We could also add the word invisible. I'm thinking of the scenes shot in the forest in very dim light where the spectator is really plunged into the night.

The night or the forest that acts like a sluice between two worlds. At night, your visual cues no longer exist. You're in a void in a way, you're turning yourself in to the world, you lay down your weapons, like a prerequisite essential to all new birth. And that's what I also tried to bring to life with Céline Bozon, the director of photography, who was essential to the film. Her enthusiasm enabled her, enabled us to be available to everything that was happening.

What is the poem we hear in the last part of the film?

It's a poem by Novalis, an excerpt from "Hymns to the Night", which is, fittingly, a call for the night as a territory of destination. What was funny was that we started with a

French translation of the German text, and then translated it into Lingala. I did a little bit of reading of the work by philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne, an advocate of the concept of lateral universality, which is a means of finding oneself in the other while allowing the other space for his or her specificity. That drove the film. It isn't a film about Kinshasa, but rather about "us". The poem is a call for the night, a link, a vestige of 19th Century European tradition in this regard that has all but disappeared. Africa brings it to life and sets the stakes. It is central in this globalized world and will be more and more. For me, it is the present.

Paris, November 2016

DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHY

ALAIN GOMIS

Alain Gomis is a Franco-Bissau Guinean-Senegalese director. He was born in 1972 in France, where he grew up. His first two short films, "Tourbillons" followed by "Petite lumière", were selected and received awards at several international festivals. In 2001, his first feature-length film, *L'Afance*, won the Silver Leopard at the Locarno Film Festival. Then came *Andalucia* in 2007 starring Samir Guesmi, then *Tey* starring Saul Williams, which was selected for competition at Berlin and won the Golden Stallion at Fespaco in 2013. A partner at Granit Films along with Newton Aduaka (Nigerian director, Ezra) and Valérie Osouf (French director), Alain Gomis also works with producer Oumar Sall (Cinékap) on a training program for young filmmakers and technicians in Senegal (Up Court-métrages). *Félicité* is his 4th feature-length film.

DIRECTOR FILMOGRAPHY

FEATURE-LENGTH FILMS

L'Afrance, 90', 2001 (Mille et Une Productions)

Silver Leopard at the 2001 Locarno Film Festival de Locarno - GNCP Prize at the 2002 Angers Festival - Bayard d'Or at the 2002 Namur Festival –Grand Prize at the 2002 Pan African Film Festival in Los Angeles - Grand Prize and Audience Award at the 2002 African, Asian and Latin American Film Festival - Prix Oumarou Ganda Prize for Best First Feature Film at Fespaco 2003 Toronto International Film Festival - Sundance Film Festival – London International Film Festival - Thessaloniki International Film Festival - Rotterdam International Film Festival- San Francisco International Film Festival - Sydney Film Festival - Jerusalem International Film Festival - Festival do Rio...

Andalucia, 90', 2007 (Mille et Une Productions)

Mostra de Venise 2007 Giornate Degli Autori (Venice Days) Bayard d'Or for Best Actor for Samir Guesmi at the Namur Film Festival – Audience Award at the Entrevue Festival in Belfort - Chicago International Film Festival – Montreal World Film Festival – 2008 Rotterdam International Film Festival...

Tey, 90', 2012 (Granit Films / Maïa Cinéma / Agora Films / Cinékap)

Berlinale Competition 2012 - Golden Stallion and Prize for Best Actor for Saul Williams at FESPACO 2013 – City of Venice Prize at the Mostra in Venise – Audience Award at the La Roche-sur-Yon Film Festival- Grand Prize at the African, Asian and Latin American Film Festival in Milan - Seattle International Film Festival : Emerging Master Award – Special Jury Prize at the Carthage Film Festival – Best Director at Trophées du Cinéma Francophone - Best film, Best Actor awards at the Cordova Film – Best Actor Award at the Khourigba African Film Festival – Special Mention at the Kerala Film - Festival de Locarno Open Doors- Chicago International Film Festival – Namur Film Festival - London Interna- tional Film Festival - Los Angeles International Film Festival - Sydney Film Festival - Bombay Film Festival - Dubaï Film Festival- Addis Abeba – Mon- treal World Film Festival - La Rochelle Film Festival - Rio Film Festival - At- lanta Film Festival

SHORT FILMS

Caramels et chocolats, 12', 1996

Tout le monde peut se tromper, 8',

1998 Tourbillons, 13', 1999

Clermont-Ferrand Film Festival - NY African Film Festival – Namur Film Festival

Petite lumière, 15', 2003

Bayard d'Or at the 2003 Namur Film Festival - Grand Prize at the 2003 Villeurbanne Film Festival GNCR Prize at the 2003 Pantin Film Festival – Audience Award at the New- York Children's Film Festival – Selected at the 2004 Césars - Sundance Film Festival - Berlinale - FESPACO - Clermont-Ferrand – Carthage – Marrakech – Angers – Montréal – Amsterdam - Oslo...

Ahmed, 15', 2007

Clermont-Ferrand Film Festival, Montréal.

CAST BIOGRAPHIES

VERO TSHANDA BEYA (Félicité) was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo. She grew up in Kinshasa where she pursued business studies. An art lover, she eventually turned to popular Congolese theater. *Félicité* is her first film role.

PAPI MPAKA (Tabu) was born in 1974 in the Democratic Republic of Congo. He learned the mechanic trade from his father, and now owns a garage in Kinshasa where he trains youth from disadvantaged neighborhoods. He was cast as Tabu in *Félicité* during an open casting call held in Kinshasa.

GAETAN CLAUDIA (Samo) was born in Kinshasa in 1997. He answered an open casting call for *Félicité* held in his neighborhood. He hopes to pursue a film career while continuing his studies.

KASAI ALLSTARS Kasai Allstars is a collective bringing together 15 musicians from various orchestras. All are Kasai natives, but represent five different ethnic groups. The group's first album, *In The 7th Moon, The Chief Turned Into A Swimming Fish And Ate The Head Of His Enemy By Magic* (2008, Crammed Discs) had a lasting and profound impact on the imaginations of musicians and music lovers around the world, particularly those of the Anglo-Saxon indie and electronic artists and media, who saw it as a kind of "first rock" – an accidental combination of trance and avant-garde. In 2010, Crammed Discs released the album *Tradi-Mods vs. Rockers*, a multi-artist homage to the music of Kasai Allstars, Konono No1 and other groups from the Congotronics movement. In 2011, Kasai Allstars joined a Congotronics vs. Rockers project to form a super group made up of 10 Congolese musicians and 10 independent rock musicians. The latest album by Kasai Allstars is called *Beware The Fetish*. As with all of the group's projects, Vincent Kenis, a Belgian producer/ musician, produced the album. *Beware The Fetish* appears on the lists of best albums of the year published by British magazines including MOJO, Uncut, The Quietus, etc. The Kasai Allstars have performed in many of the largest international music festivals including Glastonbury, Roskilde, Eurockéennes, Couleur Café, Vieilles Charrues, Paléo, Fuji Rock etc.

AROUND FÉLICITÉ

A film is a story of characters, like *Félicité* - a personality before being a character. A film is also a history, a matter of time and memories, underground influences and sometimes more explicit references. It begins long before the opening scene and ends long after the credits roll. This is particularly true in the case of Alain Gomis, whose projects are always journeys prior to being objects.

A strong-minded woman, *Félicité* inhabits each and every word she sings into the microphone with her husky, soulful voice. She is like a warrior, proud and tough – sometimes too much so - reminding us of Nina Simone, another woman skilled in the unrelenting combat of the spoken word. Her spirit lurks within this film, bringing to mind the blues piece *Ain't Got No* - a story about life in the slums at first, but that is ultimately about resurrection.

Hers is not the only spirit present in the film. Félicité is also the echo of a Léonard Pongo photograph: diaphanous black and white, shot in slow shutter mode in an ambiguous ambiance. As is often the case with this Franco-Congolese photographer, everything that constitutes the texture of the image is mirrored in the film's reflections.

Other artists also inspired the Franco-Senegalese director while he was creating this intimate and universal fresco. Ben Okri, the Nigerian poet, and Sony Labu Tansi, the prolific Congolese writer, are also among the authors that accompanied Alain Gomis throughout this long journey to the end of the night. Equally present was Kiripi Katembo, the great photographer gone too soon, who participated in the preparation of the film wherein each and every image tells about an alternate reality in the capital of the DRC. There was also influence from visual artists: the somewhat childish, slightly trashy, often funny and occasionally terrifying universe of the Congolese artist Kura Shomali or the work of Gastineau Massamba, who takes the traditional medium of embroidery and redirects it to obtain a quirky, twisted result. All of these and more allowed Alain Gomis to create an eerie domain in which to structure his film and envision it before it was even made.

A film is a story made with fragments of other stories. It is also a place for encounters and creations, offering up material to be transformed. Such is the intention of "Around Félicité" - a multidimensional, informal collection of vanishing points and alternative perspectives whose approach is not to erase the traces of those who have carried it, but rather to retain the nourishing path they laid and continue to fertilize it by inviting other creators to leave their own imprints and original impressions with regard to the film. "The idea is for it to be the material for meeting other people who can then use it to do something else. Let it become a territory of intersections." This territory, with its borders intentionally left open, will take on various shapes: concerts and remixes, exhibitions, special evenings, and videos made using unedited scenes. All of this work done after, around, based on and in parallel to the film existed before the first scene was even shot. More than an accomplished project, it is about building a multifaceted, multimedia object with both finished and unfinished edges, a shape shifting, mutating subject that we can zoom in on or zoom out from for an aerial view. A website will also serve to host all of this reconfigured material.

All of these elements come together to form an ensemble that is varied and consistent, sometimes abstract, sometimes more concrete, body and soul. From the deep sounds of the Berlin-based Africaine 808 to the trendy Californian Daedalus, the more brazen Brit Esa Williams, or the French artist High Wolf aka Zone Myth Chant: primitive beats blend into a synthetic drone with each taking a turn at the helm to produce a set of multi-tracks with a stratospheric ambiance that transports listeners to another dimension.

Working in lockstep, other painters and visual artists have also joined in to draw their own tangents and diagonals: the highly active South African Bruce Clark and his watery human subjects, the Senegalese artist Soly Cissé with his hybrid humanoids, the Kinshasan Mega Mingiedi who, without ever seeing a single image from the film,

created a portrait of Félicité in which the outlines of Kinshasa appear as if by magic, or the Kenyan artist Evans Mbugua who designed the film poster, bringing together photography, graphic design and painting. Each artist digs down into the material with his or her own style – and most using multiple techniques - to examine identities and question the soul lurking behind each line.

It is about listening to and seeing what we don't think we perceive - even imagining alternative narratives, as will be the case when filmmakers including Haitian-American director Michelange Quay, the Nigerian director Newton Aduaka and the Franco-Senegalese director Mati Diop grab hold of the film in order to (re-)deconstruct a piece of the story in their own way... a never-ending story.

Jacques Denis

Paris, January 6, 2017

FÉLICITÉ

CAST

Félicité: Véro Tshanda Beya

Tabu: Papi Mpaka

Samo: Gaetan Claudia

The Kasai Allstars

The Orchestre Symphonique de Kinshasa conducted by Armand Wa- basolele

Diangienda

and Nadine Ndebo, Muambuyi, Leon Makola, Sylvie Kandala, Modero Totokani, and

Bavon Diana

CREDITS

Directed By: Alain Gomis

Screenplay by: Alain Gomis in collaboration with Delphine Zingg and Olivier Loustau

Director of Photography: Céline Bozon

Documentary Footage: Dieudo Hamadi, Céline Bozon

Sound: Benoît de Clerck

Costumes and Makeup: Nadine Otsobogo Boucher

Set Design: Oumar Sall (le long)

Assistant Directors: Demba Dieye, Delphine Daull

Acting Coaches: Delphine Zingg, Sylvie Kandala

Film Editing: Fabrice Rouaud, Alain Gomis

Sound Editing: Fred Meert, Ingrid Simon, Héléna Réveillere

Mixing: Jean-Pierre Laforce

Music Coordinator: Anouk Khelifa

Music: KASAI ALLSTARS, ARVO PÄRT interpreted by the SYMPHONIC
ORCHESTRA OF KINSHASA

Executive Production: DRC Roger Kangudia (Fixer Congo)/ Oumar Sall (Cinékap)

Produced By:

Arnaud Dommerc

Oumar Sall

Alain Gomis

Co-Produced By:

Anne-Laure Guégan

Géraldine Sprimont

Vanessa Ciszewski,

Georges Schoucair

A ANDOLFI, GRANIT FILMS and CINEKAP production

in co-production with NEED PRODUCTIONS, KATUH STUDIO and SCHORTCUT
FILMS