

# FILM REVIEW

**Sarah Maldoror, director. *Sambizanga*.** 1972/ Restored 2022. 98 minutes. Portuguese, Lingala and Kimbundu with English subtitles. Republic of the Congo. Criterion Collection. No price reported.

*Sambizanga*, directed by Sarah Maldoror, has been restored and digitized. It is beautiful, and it is still powerful. Originally released in 1972, this film is an adaptation of *The Real Life of Domingos Xavier* by Portuguese-Angolan author and activist Jose Luandino Vieira. The film's script was co-written by French writer Maurice Pons and Mário Pinto de Andrade, Angolan activist, poet, leader of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), and Maldoror's companion. Through the story of one woman's search for her imprisoned husband, the film boldly captures the perilous nature of the early 1960s anti-colonial resistance movement in Angola. Made during the Angolan War of Independence from Portuguese colonial rule (1961–1974), *Sambizanga* was filmed in Republic of the Congo using both professional and nonprofessional actors, including many exiled MPLA activists. Its preservation is part of the African Film Heritage Project, a collaboration between the Cineteca di Bologna, the Film Foundation's World Cinema Project, the Pan African Federation of Filmmakers, and UNESCO. Its availability in digital format is cause for celebration.

Maldoror, daughter of a Guadeloupean father and French mother, grew up in France. As a young artist, she began working in the theatre in the 1950s, but subsequently left Paris in 1960 to study filmmaking in Moscow with Mark Danskoï. After having worked as an assistant on Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1965), she joined ranks with other Moscow-trained filmmakers in depicting the African liberation movements of the 1960s. Of the forty or so films made by Maldoror, *Sambizanga* is most significant for being one of the first full-length features directed by a woman on the African continent and for its attention to both the beauty and politics of resistance. It was awarded the Tanit d'Or, the highest prize at the prestigious Carthage Film Festival in Tunisia, in 1972.

Named for the Sambizanga neighborhood in Luanda where many anti-colonial resistance and MPLA activists lived, the film traces Maria's (Elise Andrade) lengthy journey to find her husband, Domingos

(Domingos de Oliveira), who had been arrested by the colonial authorities in the months leading up to the start of the Angolan War of Independence. The film begins with an outline of the African continent with Angola's borders traced and its capital city, Luanda, pinpointed. The image zooms into the word "Luanda" before it opens on a text explaining that Sambizanga is a "working-class district" from which underground resistance networks emerged to fight the Portuguese colonial power.


These visual details offer a short geography and history lesson, zooming in on the importance of a place that was still at war, yet simultaneously pivoting to the story of the effect that one man and one woman can have on an entire clandestine movement. Before we meet Domingos and Maria, the film shows Black men working at a quarry, breaking up boulders with hammers and rods and loading buckets of rocks into a crusher as the sound track plays a song that repeats "monangambé" (the title of Maldoror's earlier film and a rallying cry of the MPLA). Thus, the film presents both class and political struggles in its first few moments. When the white Portuguese boss arrives and Domingos confesses to a co-worker in a conspiratorial tone, "I know Whites well," the question of class quickly intersects with those of race, colonial power, and resistance to it.

Within the backdrop of the Angolan anti-colonial resistance movement are the people at the center of Maldoror's film. Maldoror depicts these characters leading their daily lives using mostly close-ups, with close framing and ambient sound. The young, loving couple of Maria and Domingos at the beginning of the film is shown in the everyday rhythm of daily married life, their tender embraces, the affectionate care of their son, the lingering sounds of a pounding pestle on mortar as the village quiets at night. When Maria is on the road, at times the camera drifts off to show the lush green foliage, the mountains, or the bustling city, yet it always returns to her: her face, her scarf, her feet, her arms. Equally important is the tight framing that reflects the violence of colonization: the illegal arrest of Domingos, the small space of the jeep that confines him, the prison cell that holds him, the office where he is beaten. These images are often juxtaposed in the editing to show the couple's connection and their parallel resistance to colonial injustice despite their separation.

Especially poignant are the scenes peopled with caregivers and concerned bystanders when Maria needs help. She is welcomed by a family friend, comforted by two elderly women, held by a woman as she weeps while another woman immediately takes the baby from her back and starts nursing him, or, as she learns of her husband's fate, surrounded and supported by the strong arms of many women. The close-ups structure what the film is all about—movement: Maria's determined search across country and city to find Domingos; Maldoror's dynamic camera revealing the movement for liberation in everyday life; and the grinding gears of change in the independence era of the early 1960s. For the scope of what seems like a private matter—a

wife looking for her husband—the film succeeds in universalizing the notion that people have the power to create change.

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