

Nha Fala

(“My Voice” in Portuguese Creole)

Nha Fala, a lively musical comedy directed by Flora Gomes, was one of the films nominated at the 59th Venice International Film Festival. Nha Fala, which received European funding, is centred metaphorically around the theme of freedom. With an original score by Manu Dibango, it tells the story of Vita, a beautiful young girl from Guinea-Bissau who leaves her native village for France. Vita’s family is afflicted by an ancestral curse according to which any woman in her family who sings will die. However, once in Paris she falls in love with a young musician...

A native of Guinea-Bissau, Flora Gomes studied in Cuba and Senegal. A multi-award winner who cites his country’s legendary revolutionary leader Amilcar Cabral as a strong influence, the veteran film-maker wants to show another side of Africa.

Dorothy Morrissey

What made you get involved in cinema when it has such a small following in Guinea-Bissau?

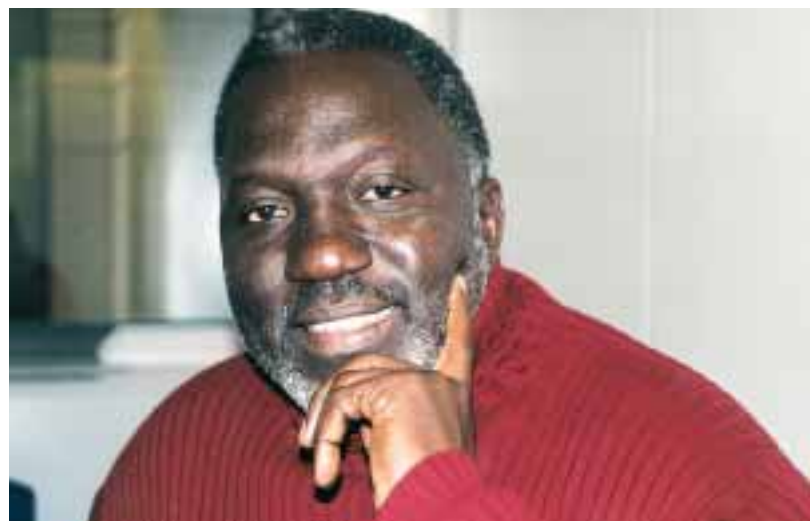
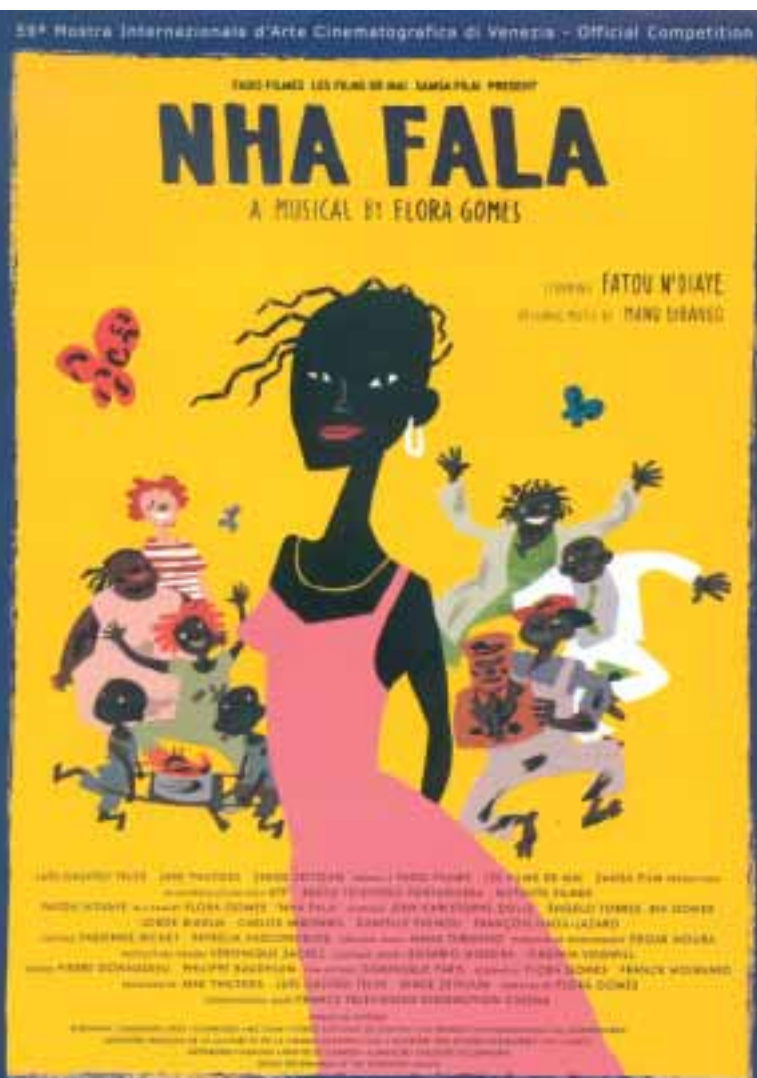
It’s an adventure. I am very forward-looking. When I was young I did not really know what I wanted to be and I just fell into film-making. Now I am glad that I did because I think it is very important to let the world see images of our land, images that tell the story of our history. My colleague, Sana (Na N’hada), and I do not regret our chosen path, even though it is not easy.

Nha Fala is full of dance and music, and slightly surreal scenes; starting with the funeral of a parrot and ending with a huge, colourful “fake” funeral. What inspired you?

I wanted people to see our Africa, the Africa of my dreams, the Africa that I love and that I would like my children to know one day. It is a happy Africa, where people dance, where people can speak freely. It is my take on the future for a new generation. I am a dreamer. Whenever Africa is spoken about or depicted, it is always in terms of the aid we receive, war, people dying of starvation, sick people... These things do of course exist in Africa: Africans kill other Africans, and nobody knows why we go to war yet it still goes on. But there is another side to Africa, and that is what I wanted to show. It is a side you never see on your television screens in the West. That is why I made this film.

You have created a very modern film that nonetheless incorporates age-old traditions. Would you say it is an accurate reflection of Africa today?

While it is true that many Africans set great store by tradition and magic, the continent is definitely changing. I know that in every civilisation in the world, and every country in the world, there are always two cultures and a point at which they meet. I share the belief that the future





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of this world lies in the intermixing of cultures. It is inevitable. Your culture mixed with our culture can give rise to an identity, and this identity will define our country. This is why I made this film, thinking all the while of the generations to come: those who have not experienced colonisation, who want to go abroad to study but return to their own country to work, to build it up. Because I believe that the future of mankind is Africa.

Why?

Because we have so much to offer, particularly on a cultural level. I believe that when all the ethnic, cultural and religious conflicts have ended, Africa will find itself. It will truly be a place where we can live in peace and harmony.

Why did you decide to film in Cape Verde?

My aim was to make this film in an anonymous setting. It is not meant to be Cape Verde, it is just some unidentified place.

As for the cast, are all the actors from Guinea-Bissau?

Many are, although the actress who plays the lead role, Vita, is French, of Senegalese origin. She learnt Creole (the language of the film) in two months for the part.

Some are experienced actors: Bia Gomes, who plays Vita's mother, is the only actress who has appeared in all my films. I have also worked with the young actress who plays Vita's friend, Tina, as well as Georges and Amélia, all of whom are professionals.

The dance and crowd scenes in the film must have been choreographed. How did you manage this?

I did this my own way. We had a choreographer, Clara, a Portuguese woman, and a West Indian woman. I did not want American-style

choreography, because it would not fit in with the film. I wanted it to identify with the real Africa. I wanted to make a film, a musical, from our point of view, a million miles from the very 'controlled' American style.

Is the film based on a true story or is it something you have invented?

The story is a figment of my imagination, but it is based on truth. People have told me that this sort of thing did go on at the time. Take Salik, the Malian singer, for example. Apparently, he wasn't allowed to sing because he belonged to a very high caste in Mali, who are not supposed to sing.

Why did you decide to break the taboo in your film?

For me, singing is an expression of freedom. If we are silenced, we are disadvantaged. Music has always been extremely important in our lives. It is so often said that in Africa nothing has worked since independence. But music is the exception. Look at Cesaria Evora, Youssou N'Dour or Manu Dibango, who did the soundtrack for the film. This is my way of paying homage to all those people who, one way or another, in Africa, Europe or elsewhere, have done something for African music.

A recurring image through the film is of two men transporting a statue, looking for a place to put it. Is this a statue of Amilcar Cabral?

Yes. Amilcar Cabral was an extraordinary man, a visionary, who did much for his country. But you don't see it because the people didn't follow what he said. Those young people who are going around with the statue – they are looking for a place to put it, but nobody wants it because it bothers them. Cabral is still waiting to see those things for which he gave his life. He should have his place. I will not stop making films until I have made a film about him. ■

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