

Toronto International Film Festival 2012—Part 6

Interviews with five filmmakers about life and art in India, Ivory Coast, Guatemala, Angola and Haiti

By David Walsh
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This is the sixth of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 6-16). Part 1 was posted September 22, Part 2 September 26, Part 3 September 28, Part 4 October 2 and Part 5 October 5.

A good many honest and intriguing films screened at the 2012 Toronto film festival, more than at any such event in recent years. The WSWs contacted a number of directors who were gracious enough to convey by e-mail comments about their films and the conditions in their respective countries.

Manjeet Singh, director of *Mumbai's King*

Mumbai's King, directed by Manjeet Singh, looks at a young boy and his friends and family in contemporary Mumbai. Rahul (Rahul Bairagi) has a difficult life, at odds with his often drunken father and trying to defend his long-suffering mother.

Rahul and his friend Arbaaz (Arbaaz Khan), an irrepressible balloon seller, wander around the massive Indian city, stealing potatoes, swimming, following girls, gambling, looking in on a religious festival.

The family story is somewhat familiar, but the imagery is very striking in Singh's film. Without sentimentality or condescension, and maintaining, despite everything, a relatively cheerful tone, the filmmaker treats the very poor with sincerity and compassion, something rare in the Indian (and global) cinema today.

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What motivated this particular film?

It was a desire to share my childhood memories and also to capture the audio-visual spectacle of the Ganesh Festival, which is the identity of the city. Perhaps this is the first film which captures the essence of the festival and its importance in the lives of Mumbaikars (Mumbai's citizens).

The festival catalogue suggests that your film was perhaps a response in part to *Slumdog Millionaire*. Is this a legitimate assertion?

Slumdog is a well-made film, which represents an outsider's point of view of the life in Mumbai's slums. I was working on a script based on the lives of the kids, who sing in the trains of Mumbai. It's a coming-of-age musical film, with a mind-blowing score composed by Mathias Duplessy, who also did the music for my film. We started the film but it got stuck, because the producer ran into trouble. This was way before *Slumdog* came out.

That script in a way exposed me to the lives of these kids who enjoy life to the fullest in spite of all the problems they have. There was an urge to

capture their high spirit and show it in the right light. Using real-life kids, who are telling their own personal stories honestly, without the manipulations or dictation of the market. Trying to make a film which is an insider's point of view. If you visit the slums, you will not find villains poking the eyes of the kids, but you will definitely find boys chasing the girls. The film is in no way a reaction to *Slumdog* and is a very different film.

The young people in the film were convincing. How did you find them, and how was the process of directing them?

I was so charmed by Arbaaz. He sells balloons near my house. The first interaction we had was a long one. He narrated his story, along with his family's problems. I became fond of him. Almost every passerby spoke to him and enjoyed talking to him.

Rahul, the protagonist, was picked out of a pool of eight kids we got from the neighbourhood. During the acting workshop, we tried to understand the challenges in their lives. Rahul had a problem of domestic violence in real life, which was very similar to the protagonist's problems in the script. Since he had the emotional experience required for the character, I decided to cast him. Luckily, he turned out to be an amazing actor, whom I find comparable to the biggest name in the business.

The film depicts deplorable conditions, but it does not do so in a somber or generally gloomy fashion.

The idea was to maintain the honesty of the characters and space. So we used real locations without caring whether the frame looked beautiful. We tried to stay focused on the characters and their toil in their surroundings. We purposely avoided postcard locations of the city like Marine Drive, the Gateway of India and the new Sea Link [bridge].

What is the social situation in Mumbai for the poor and the working class? Is there also an elite that is doing very well?

Around two thirds of the city lives in slums. Of course, the elites are doing well by exploiting the natural and human resources mainly. India has become the back office of the world because of skilled and cheap labour.

The elites also make money displacing the poor tribal population in rural areas and cashing in on the minerals under their homes. These stories never come out because the corporations fund the media and also the political parties. The elites form a fraction and employ 5 percent of population, which is middle class, and survive on exploiting the remaining 95 percent poor people.

What is your general opinion of the state of Indian filmmaking today?

Thanks to advances in digital technology, it has become relatively easy

to make a film. Filmmakers who believe in themselves—and are not insecure about a big name being attached to their projects—are going ahead and making films they believe in without caring about the markets.

I see no excuse for filmmakers not being able to make films any more. Unfortunately, the media is not able to gauge these films because they need to be discovered and the media is used to spoon-feeding.

Also, the media does not realize the level of skills required to make a film unconventionally. The films made with the Bollywood studios, which are a little bit different from regular Bollywood films, are projected as “independent” films by the media, because they have not tried to explore what the real Indian independent cinema is.

The little difference in such films might be the use of known and proven actors, who are not stars; or it could be a film without lip-synching; or a derivative film formed from bits of celebrated world cinema. I call these films “Bollywood Indies.”

While the Bollywood-funded films find traditional distribution, there is no exhibition space for genuine Independent films. That’s something the filmmakers are fighting for, as we celebrate 100 years of Indian cinema.

Do you have further projects?

For the last six years I have created a bank of scripts. Among them is a quadrilogy of stories based on caste discrimination in different parts of India, in different regional languages.

Then I have a script made out of the clichés of commercial cinema, which has a thriller, a love triangle, a social-political noir with terrorism elements. There is a musical coming-of-age film based on the lives of kids, who sing in Mumbai local trains. A script based on our obsession with cricket, which is set in Mumbai and captures the finer details of “gully” (street) cricket. There is a silent thriller feature script I am working on.

Philippe Lacôte, producer of *Burn It Up Djassa*

The Ivory Coast is an impoverished country of 20 million people in West Africa. The political crisis of 2010-2011, involving the forces of former president Laurent Gbagbo and rival Alassane Ouattara, became the pretext for brutal French imperialist intervention.

Director Lonesome Solo and producer Philippe Lacôte have created an unusual work in *Burn It Up Djassa*. Tony (Abdoul Karim Konaté) was forced to leave school for economic reasons. His mother has died, his brother’s become a cop (Mamadou Diomandé) and his younger sister (Adélaïde Ouattara) is on her way to a life of prostitution.

Tony falls in with petty criminals and, almost inevitably, ends up on the run, pursued by his own brother. Again, the story is somewhat familiar (influenced by Visconti, as noted below), but the vivacity and sense of protest are quite strong. A rapping narrator (“Kill or be killed”.... “It’s no place for fear”) speaks for the young people, excluded, bitter, without much hope.

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This is a lively, realistic and angry film, about very difficult and harsh conditions. What was the original impulse for the film?

At the start of the film, *Burn It Up Djassa*, there was a film collective called Wassakara Productions, of which I was a founding member. In 2009, several months before the war [the 2010-2011 civil war in the Ivory Coast], we felt the need to show the Ivorian youth and their daily life on film.

I involved a director, Lonesome Solo, and camerawoman Delphine Jaquet, and a scenario emerged. The idea was to make truthful cinema, connected to the street. I believe I told them the story of the two brothers and their mother in Visconti’s *Rocco and His Brothers* [1960]. That resulted in *Burn It Up Djassa*.

Were the dialogue and story improvised at all? Were the cast members non-professionals?

In the film, the actors speak in “nouchi,” a slang that has become the

language of the Ivorian youth. It is a language that is so alive, so inventive, that meaning has not yet become frozen. So, there was a script with dialogue, but the actors could find other words to say the same thing. While editing, we became aware that the actors had respected the text almost to the letter!

In fact, the lead actors are professionals, and there are also non-actors. In a country where there is no film industry, the boundary between actors and non-actors is not so firm as where you are. For *Burn It Up Djassa*, we did casting and made our choice. The presence of non-actors, who at times play something close to their lives, brings real character to the film. Everyone comes from the same neighborhood, Wassakara, a working class suburb of Abidjan.

The situation for the young people in the film is very bleak, they do not appear to have any future. Is this an accurate representation of the general situation in Abidjan and the Ivory Coast generally?

Thank you for this question. In shooting *Burn It Up Djassa*, we were not looking for an original story, but a story that would be emblematic of the way life can be for young people in the Ivory Coast, or other African capitals. And there are many young people like Tony, who leave school because of a lack of money.

For 10 years, our country has been plunged into a political crisis, a fight that belongs to the older people. It is the youth who have been abandoned. Today, the only hope in the Ivory Coast is to leave for Europe or to become a policeman.

Can you speak a little about the 2010-2011 crisis and the intervention of the Western powers? What have been the consequences for the population?

The 2010-2011 crisis is exceptional because we saw a former colonial power (France) bomb the presidential palace for 10 days. Without necessarily supporting former president [Laurent] Gbagbo, this is a regression from the political and economic independence we have been seeking for a long time. Part of the population feels that we’ll never get away from being France’s private preserve. Another part thinks that France stopped a war that it was going to get bogged down in. In any case, it is France that makes the military decision.

The “narrator” (Greek chorus) is a very striking figure. At the end, he says (in the English translation), “If society doesn’t give a damn about us, we don’t give a damn about society.” Is this a general attitude?

Yes, it is the attitude of a large part of the youth who did not go to school. The only positive examples today are football [soccer] players. Apart from that, the young people think everything is distorted and believe in getting rich quick.

Has the film been shown in Cote d’Ivoire, or are there any plans to show it?

From the beginning, the film was made on a low budget because it is an attempt to produce films on location, for the Ivorian public. So, we plan to bring it out in the Ivory Coast. This is not an easy thing because there are only a few movie theaters in the Ivory Coast (six or seven), all the others have become evangelical churches. The echo effect from the Toronto festival will help us achieve that goal.

Is there a film industry in Cote d’Ivoire? What is the situation for filmmakers and artists in the country?

There is no real film industry in the Ivory Coast. The country is known in the sub-region for comic television series, with a certain degree of success elsewhere. But there are young filmmakers who are working and a minister of culture who is in the process of putting a finance commission in place.

As there is no real industry, we are free to invent. In the coming years, Ivorian cinema will be talked about. *Burn It Up Djassa* is the first sign of that.

Julio Hernández Cordón, director of

Julio Hernández Cordón's *Dust* begins with an attempted suicide. Juan (Agustín Ortíz Pérez) remains obsessed with the death of his father in Guatemala's savage military repression of the 1980s and 1990s. He lives in a small village with his mother (María Telón Soc), trying to make ends meet, while harassing the individual, a neighbor, whom he claims was responsible for turning his father in to the authorities.

Meanwhile, documentary filmmaker Ignacio (Eduardo Spiegeler) has family problems of his own, with a daughter from a previous relationship and a pregnant filmmaking partner, Alejandra (Alejandra Estrada). The pair are making a film about women searching for the remains of those murdered in an indigenous village in 1982.

Cordón has co-written and directed a complicated film. More than 200,000 people died in the military-led repression in Guatemala. This history haunts the present. Some of the characters seem capable of orienting themselves to contemporary life, others are perhaps too seriously damaged. *Dust* is a disturbing, visually appealing work.

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The film describes a generally tragic situation, and its mood is understandably somber. What was the immediate impulse for this film?

That war does not end when the shooting ends; that the wounds from wars go on and on and leave us with a sense of impunity and lack of understanding; and that vengeance is not a solution. But in the movie, vengeance is examined through the eyes of someone who cannot live with things that he believes are unjust.

The characters all seemed wounded by past events, especially Juan. Is he too damaged by the consequences of the military dictatorship to function "normally"? Are there many people like that in Guatemala today?

I believe that in Guatemala there is an atmosphere of complete impunity. That leads to people taking the law into their own hands. It is an impunity that resulted from the [civil] war and the social differences that exist. Because of the war, things are not spoken about, not discussed, not part of a dialogue.

It was dangerous to do it during the armed conflict. For that reason, it is a country where the citizens are suppressed; and when they cannot take it any more, they explode in an irrational manner, as happens with Juan.

In Guatemala, one lives with violence as if it were normal. It is a painful, daily violence. This is a sick country, and people cannot create change or the incentive for it, due to the economic circumstances.

The filmmaker Ignacio plays a somewhat ambiguous role. Is he more interested in the truth about the events of 1982 or in his own career and problems?

Ignacio carries out a job he is contracted to do. In that job, he discovers a situation that is alien to him, but that corresponds to his position or space. He is no longer able to live with or relate to this situation. Furthermore, he is either a novice documentary filmmaker, or a mediocre one. I wanted to portray something about the relationship of someone who knows that it is healthy to distance himself from his characters, but who takes a liking to them, without recognizing that fact.

We are told by the media that the tragic events in Guatemala are all in the unhappy past, that "democracy" now reigns. What are the social conditions for the population?

Violence now is much stronger than during the armed conflict. In the past, violence was driven by politics. Now it is economic, or comes from organized crime. Everyone is a potential victim.

Powerful and wealthy people represent less than 10 percent of the population. They do not want to relinquish control. They behave like landowners did during the colonial times.

Someone says (in the English translation), "To me, every place is sad." A very poetic line, and also very sad. How can this sadness be

overcome?

I don't know. That is what I like to say with my movies. At times, I feel drawn to films that are sad or that contain complex problems—films in which people are fragile and, beneath that fragility, generate questions about the place where we are or live.

Why do you make films?

I like to tell stories. I like to write and, for a brief time, think that the universe belongs to me and what happens or does not happen depends on my mood. I feel that creating movies is equivalent to talking loudly to oneself without people thinking that one is bad or crazy.

Zézé Gamboa, director of *The Great Kilapy*

Angola suffered from both colonialism and civil war in the twentieth century. Zézé Gamboa's *The Great Kilapy* takes place in the years before Angola's 1975 independence from centuries of Portuguese rule.

A womanizing, debonair con man nicknamed Joãozinho (Lázaro Ramos) navigates his way through elegant society Lisbon in the 1960s. He has no interest in ideology or revolution, but he helps a leftist out of friendship, and comes to the attention of the secret police, who determine he's a "Don Juan...mixed up in politics."

Back in Angola, working for the treasury department, he carries out a *kilapy* [swindle] that helps undermine the Portuguese colonial regime, and gets jailed for it. At the time of independence, he's undeservedly declared a national hero. The film is lively and the central figure, well represented by Lázaro Ramos, sticks in the memory in particular.

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The film is a vivid picture of life in both Portugal and Angola, especially on the eve of the revolutions of 1974-1975. Why did you decide to make a film about this moment of history?

The film in reality goes from 1965 to 1974 and has more to do with the decay of Portuguese colonialism in Africa, and therefore, the link between these two countries, Angola and Portugal, and peoples in that period.

The central character is charming, cynical and ingenious, sometimes a thief. But he also has certain principles and integrity. Would you like an audience to sympathize with him, criticize him, admire him—or all three?

It is better to please the public than to disappoint it, but I leave it to the various viewers to draw their own conclusions. I myself liked all the attitudes revealed in the one character. There's a striking ingenuity or simplicity and good will underneath the lack of principles in this character, which portrays something about the overall attitudes in Angolan society at the end of the Portuguese colonial empire.

Portuguese colonialism in Africa is the oldest in the world. Portugal was in Angola for 500 years, so there are a lot of contradictions and mixed feelings that have remained in the colonized society until the present moment.

Is Joãozinho based on a real person, or persons? Did he help Portuguese leftists? Did he contribute, by accident or not, to the downfall of the colonial regime?

The story is based on a real person and real events, but is fictionalized. In reality, he helped a childhood friend (Rui Pereira), a white Angolan who was linked with the Angolan liberation movement, the MPLA [People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola].

All of the contribution he makes to the downfall of the colonial regime is accidental.

It is now 37 years since the end of colonialism in Angola. What are the conditions for ordinary people? Is there an elite that has become rich?

After Angola became independent, there was a civil war that lasted 22 years, on top of more than 13 years of an intense anti-colonial war. Angola has only lived at peace for 10 years.

Current conditions for the Angolan people are very difficult, often

descending to poverty.

Yes, there exists a small elite which is very, very, very rich.

If you are in Portugal, what is the situation there since the new crisis of the European economy began? How do you see the future for Portugal?

I currently live in Portugal. The situation produced by the economic crisis is very brutal for the countries of southern Europe. There is a huge lack of European solidarity, which is in contradiction to the great dream of a joint European Community.

The new political elites in this Europe of today are casting aside this dream of the creation of a Europe of solidarity and fraternity.

The situation in Portugal is very bad, and its future will depend a great deal on changes in the rest of Europe, more concretely in Germany, and on the solidarity and ability of the countries of the South (Italy, Spain, Ireland, Greece) to form a common front and on the dialogue with Merkel's Germany.

Jonas d'Adesky, director of *Three Kids*

A devastating earthquake in 2010 added immensely to the social misery of the Haitian people, the victims of American neo-colonial domination in particular for more than a century. Belgian filmmaker Jonas d'Adesky has made a work about three young boys, who take the opportunity of the earthquake to run away from a home in Port-au-Prince.

The 12-year-olds, Vitaleme, Pierre and Mikenson, then live in the streets, along with thousands of others. Each is looking for some sort of comfort or moment of peace, from both past and present traumas. Young as they are, they have troubling memories and thoughts.

They also have aspirations. One wants to go to Brazil to see football, another has Germany on his mind ("Because I saw it on TV. It's a beautiful country"). The film's story is simple enough, but the faces of the three boys, somber, sensitive, thoughtful, communicate a good deal about the Haitian tragedy.

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The film is about one of the poorest countries in the world, a country that we rarely see in films. Can you explain why you made it?

I went to Haiti as a volunteer to make my small contribution to the country's recovery after the earthquake of January 2010. My mission was to direct a documentary about the Timkatec reception center [in Port-au-Prince], which offers primary education and vocational training for disadvantaged children.

The center is supported by the NGO Geomoun, whose officials I met in Belgium. I told them I was at their disposal, but that I also wanted to have the time for a more personal fiction film project, *Twa timoun (Three Kids)*, whose synopsis I had already written.

The situation was ideal, because through the Timkatec center, I came to know Haiti, the children, Creole and Port-au-Prince in particular. The center is run by Haitians, so once on site I was completely immersed in life there and not partitioned off by the draconian security guidelines, like people sent by the big NGOS.

I think if Haiti only appears rarely in fiction films, it is because people are very afraid of the local reality, of the insecurity, and often they figure it's very difficult to plan things in this context, especially if they have limited resources.

How did you find these kids, who perform very honestly? How was the experience of directing them?

The kids come from the Timkatec center, or, more precisely, from the elementary school for boys called Timkatec 1. The "twa timoun" [three kids] are among the students who board at the school.

The choice of Vitaleme, Mickenson and Pierre was made quite naturally. They were really friends, they were able to read Creole (and thus the scenario) and, in addition, they managed to play a scene without disruptions, ticks, looking at the camera, smiles, etc., which was the case

with the others. Of course, none of that surprised me, I repeat, these are kids who are not used to coming forward, being looked at and expressing themselves in public except with their school-friends.

In general, the experience of directing was difficult because the three kids all had to be good at the same time. At times, we were obliged to make choices in the editing because a successful cover shot was too complicated. We also tried to limit the number of takes for each shot, the idea being to come up with something at a decent level of play, but I couldn't go too far in rehearsal, because then it becomes mechanical.

We also added one or another sequence connected to what the kids did among themselves when they were on their own. Sometimes, we had to discuss with them separately so they didn't lose everything, because a month and a half filming is long for them. And, moreover, these are children who have no natural authority over them. So we had to convince them to take part in the adventure to the end. We didn't have a single day of shooting without something unexpected happening.

We alternated between sequences where they were very good and others where we worked like dogs to achieve something just right. But I know it's difficult to shoot with children, and we couldn't offer them the framework that exists on a normal shoot. In a general sense, they learned that it wasn't a game, but also a job. But they were tough, like the rest of us. It was a tough shoot, but with a very positive energy and a well-balanced relationship because the crew was as small as them.

Can you describe the impact of the 2010 Haitian earthquake, in which hundreds of thousands of people died?

In the aftermath of the earthquake that devastated the infrastructure in Port-au-Prince and a large part of the productive capacities, some 250,000 people died, 300,000 people were injured and 1.5 million were made homeless. The damage was estimated at approximately \$14 billion.

A cholera epidemic broke out (during my stay there) and affected 5 percent of the population, and 6,700 Haitians eventually died of that epidemic. Half the population (4.5 million) is estimated to be food insecure, and 70 percent of those of working age have been left without jobs. But the earthquake only exacerbated a situation of immense poverty that has existed in Haiti for a very long time, a country considered to be the poorest in the hemisphere.

To be continued

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