

I always see in the cinema that we build up heroes but don't show what makes people heroes. It's why we have so much reality TV today, because people think you can just be. No, you have to work to be. I wanted to put work at the center of the film, because how else can I define Pierrette? It's her work, her movements through the neighborhood... It's really aesthetic, too.

And money?

Well, what can you do without money? It is important to see how money travels; it is important to see how we are all bound by it, and sometimes destroyed by it. I wanted to show the power of money in our society, but also that we don't have to pay so much attention to it, because there is something more important: solidarity. When Pierrette visits various women to ask for help, love comes first. Even if we don't have money, we can give love.

I'm curious—how do payments work when you're employing your family and friends as actors?

When I made my first movie with my mother, I didn't have enough money. This time, I was able to pay the actors something, and everyone was crying. Everyone had an envelope with their fee for the work they did. It was not too much, but it was something. Then when I received more money at the end of the year, I gave them another envelope. I got more money after finishing the film, and I gave them more again. For me, cinema is life, and in life, I share, no matter what I have or don't have.

Like Pierrette.

Exactly. Cinema is life, and I put people at the center of my life.

What was your family's reaction when they saw the film?

They were all crying. To see direct representation, it's really moving. Even if the world doesn't receive the movie well, I am proud of myself for doing this, because I don't see people like my family, like Pierrette, anywhere else in cinema. There is a pride that the experience of filmmaking has brought into our lives, and that for me is the pleasure of cinema. ♦

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ABOUT THE FILM

Following the limited U.S. release of two of her documentaries—*The Two Faces of a Bamiléké Woman*, a portrait of her mother and repression by the French, and *Chez jolie coiffure* (both 2018), which explores the African diaspora via a hair salon in Belgium—Mbakam's dramatic debut offers insight into the daily lives of women in contemporary Cameroon, enlisting her cousin, Pierrette Aboheu Njeuthat, to play the titular character.

A succession of customers come to Mambar Pierrette, the neighborhood seamstress and reliable confidant, who has her own strife to deal with as a single mother barely making ends meet. As she readies clothes for upcoming social events and the commencement of the school year, heavy rain threatens to flood her workshop—one of many misfortunes in which she will have to find ways to stay afloat. Mbakam's instincts as a documentarian are put to good use in this unique character study that foregrounds common struggles and bonds among women in Africa, too often overlooked in mainstream cinema. *Official selection: Cannes, TIFF, NYFF.*

TRT: 93 min

Interview: Rosine Mbakam by Devika Girish

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You've spoken about how your interest in cinema started not with movies, but with your family. Why is making movies about your family—whether via documentary, or, as with *Mambar Pierrette*, fiction—so important to you?

My desire for cinema began with the people I grew up seeing in my daily life, in my culture. I was imagining stories about them. Cinema came after, when I was preparing to study at university. I was sure that I wanted to use all the stories that I had been imagining—by writing, by doing journalism, I didn't know how. Someone proposed cinema, and I trained for three months to learn to use a camera, and I said to myself that all the stories I had imagined as a child about my family, I was going to tell them through the cinema.

What kind of things were you imagining about your family when you were a child?

I was imagining strong characters. When I would see my mom, my aunt, my sisters, I saw strong people struggling with difficult situations in their lives and still being there. They still fought, they still continued to be joyful, they continued to live. What I was seeing, my reality, was hard. But what I was receiving from those hard moments, from those people, was really powerful.

One type of movie we still see at festivals all the time, about Africa or more generally the Global South, is the drama where bad things keep happening to the characters, and we are supposed to feel pity for them while sitting comfortably in our cinema seats. What I found so striking about *Mambar Pierrette* is that it has a similar narrative structure, with many misfortunes befalling Pierrette one after another, but there is a grace that you and Pierrette bring to it, especially toward the end of the film, that forces us away from pity.

I don't see victims, I see strong people. A woman asked me why Pierrette doesn't break down in the movie and cry. She does, but differently—by dancing. Even the scene where she's robbed by the guys on the scooter, people told me it was too sober. But I didn't want to tell the story of Pierrette the way the West would, I wanted to tell it the way we live it. When it's hard, Pierrette takes a beer and dances. I do the same thing. I'm not saying I don't cry, but it's not my final way of resolving my problems. I wanted to [show] the character in the context of my reality.

You also portray difficult realities with candor and sensitivity. Sometimes filmmakers go in the other direction: they're wary of showing poverty and destitution because of how the Western gaze might perceive it. Is that something you worry about?

No, because it is my reality. Poverty is my reality. It is the way I film it and represent it that is important and different. I am not ashamed of my reality: I grew up in the same neighborhood as Pierrette. I don't want to arrange a new reality in order to show "positive" images of Africa. This is a positive image, because I've assumed it and represented it. I frame my reality how I see it, not how the West wants it to be.

I know that fiction and documentary are hard-to-define terms, but what is the balance between the two modes in the film?

The documentary aspect is the life of Pierrette, while the political thread in the film is fiction. It's not that those political ideas are not part of Pierrette's life—her circumstances are the consequences of the politics around her—but they're not so visible in her daily life. If I did a documentary on her, I would have had to force those aspects to come out, and that's not my way of doing things. My cinema is political, and I wanted to show that there is something more to Pierrette's situation—the fact that she doesn't have money, that her husband is irresponsible—that is related to the neocolonialism in Cameroon that's not fully visible, but it's there. Fiction helped me point that out. But I didn't want fiction to take power from the life of Pierrette—to overpower the cinema that's already in the lives of people. So that's the balance.

There are two themes I was struck by in the film. You pay a lot of attention to money, the exact costs of things. And you are also very attentive to labor—to what Pierrette does with her hands. Even when she's experiencing great misfortunes, it's beautiful to see her work. Manual labor is rarely presented with such affection in movies.