

FILM REVIEW

Philippe Lacôte, director. *Night of the Kings*. 2020. Original title: *La nuit des rois*. 93 minutes. French, Dioula, Nouchi (with English subtitles). Ivory Coast/France/Canada/Senegal. Banshee Films. Price not reported.

Philippe Lacôte's latest feature film, *Night of the Kings*, blends themes of incarceration, performance, and storytelling to create a fabulist tale set deep in Ivory Coast's Banco forest, where the notorious MACA Prison—Maison d'arrêt et de correction d'Abidjan—is nestled at the edge of a clearing. Its otherworldliness is hinted at during the opening of the film, as a helicopter high angle tracking shot takes the viewer on a flight over the forest to the isolated institution as intertitles explain, over a static extreme long shot of the building, that MACA Prison is a world with its own rules. The main law is that the "Dangôro" ("Blackbeard"), the supreme leader of the prisoners, has all rights over the others. When he becomes ill and can no longer govern, he must commit suicide.

This opening sequence is followed by medium close-up shots of a young African man (played by Bakary Koné) in a yellow t-shirt being transported to the prison in the back of a half-ton police truck, defiance etched into his gaze. Dangôro (played by Steve Tientcheu) spies on the new arrival from his small barred window as he puffs on an inhaler. Clearly ailing, he confers with his "gang," Lass (Abdoul Karim Konaté) and Half-Mad (Jean Cyrille Digbeu), informing them he is choosing a new "Roman," (storyteller). Once Roman has been processed, he learns from Blackbeard that he is the new "Roman" and that when the red moon appears that night he must tell stories to the inmates. A hesitant Roman takes up his role of storyteller, buying a clearly ailing Blackbeard more time in the world of the living. What Roman is not aware of, however, is that in order to survive, he must never finish his story.

The film's narrative structure borrows from African Futurism, as Lacôte builds a layered narrative that suggests a time and space outside of this world. This speculative story space is rooted in Indigenous African experiences and aesthetics in which past, present, and future exist simultaneously. The first half of the film develops slowly, as Lacôte introduces the prison setting and characters. Blackbeard's gang is already planning his succession and new prison management. Lass covets the top position, declaring that under his rule, prisoners would become the gang's customers, rather than their slaves. He consolidates his power

by forcing transvestite Sexy (Gbazi Yves Landry) to seduce a rival named Koby (Stéphane Sebime) and slitting his throat. Roman very aptly appraises the prison environment and draws on prisoner interactions to spin his story about Zama King. This strategy takes the viewer into a mythical past of ancient kingdoms in Ivory Coast that segues with a recent past (Zama King's "Operation Clean City" terrorizing Abidjan for two years) and political present (the overthrow of Laurent Gbagbo announced on television). Roman surveys the prisoners encircling him, and explains that Zama King's father was Soni, a blind beggar who becomes the confidant of the Queen (Laetitia Ky). She, in turn, must face off (in scenes reminiscent of Souleymane Cissé's *Yeelen* [Mali, 1987]) against her younger brother in order to retain her power and throne.

Prisoners also serve as inspiration for the characters in Roman's story; for example, Soni (Rasmané Ouédraogo) as Queen's confidant in the mythical story is also a bartender in the prison. Roman's narration orients both the prisoners and the film viewer through the various digressions of story within story. These *mise-en-abîmes* are not flashbacks per se, and thus edits are not rendered through dissolves, but rather through blunt cuts. The film viewer sees the imagined mythical scenes, but the prisoners collaborate in a devised theater performance, to act out what Roman is narrating. These pantomimes are superb, and the prisoners act as a chorus, reprising Roman's phrases in song. This makes for a complicated scenario, which at times seems unwieldy, but Lacôte succeeds in enfolding the message that must ultimately be unfolded by prisoners and film viewers alike: power corrupts.

At times, the filmmaker depends on the viewer's willing suspension of disbelief to convey story information. For example, Nivaquine, the prison warden (Issaka Sawadogo), explains to the other guards that MACA (which seems more like a country club at times) belongs to the prisoners and is the only prison in the world run by an inmate. This is a strange way to impart information that should already have been known by the guards. Also, Blackbeard's death seems poorly motivated. If the never-ending story was meant to buy him time, why did he make his descent into the death ritual so early in the film? Finally, it is the character named Silence (played by French actor Denis Lavant), who rarely speaks, who warns Roman about the danger of ending the story. Although Lavant is superb in the role, this seemingly verges dangerously on the white savior trope.

Where the film excels is in its lush visual imagery. For example, the fairytale-evoking scene of Blackbeard turning into a doe during his death descent is breathtaking, and the handheld camera work of the prison pantomime and devised performances is exceptional. Lacôte has assembled an outstanding cast of performers in this fantastic tale, founded in oral storytelling tradition but framed in the model of African Futurism.

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