

SUNDAY, MAY 15, 2005

DELWENDE

(BURKINA FASO-FRANCE-SWITZERLAND)

A Dunia Prods. (France)/Les films de l'Espoir (Burkina Faso)/Thelma Film AG (Switzerland) production, with the support of Fond Francophone de Production Audiovisuelle du Sud, Unidea – UniCredit Foundation, Direction du Cinema National du Burkina Faso, TV5, Direction generale de la Cooperation internationale et du Developpement, Fonds Images Afrique et du fonds Sud, Ministere des Affaires Etrangeres – France, LVIA, the city of Turin, TVOR, Soyaf. (International sales: Funny Balloons, Paris.) Produced by Serge Bayala. Executive producer, S. Pierre Yameogo. Co-producer, Pierre-Alain Meier.

Directed, written by S. Pierre Yameogo. Camera (color), Jurg Hassler; editor, Jean-Christophe Ane; music, Wasis Diop; art director, Chef Joseph Kpobly; art adviser, Pierre Rouamba; sound (DTS) Issa Traore; sound editor, Jean-Marc Schick; second cameraman, Marc de Backer; choreographer, Yameogo. **Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (Un Certain Regard), May 12, 2005. Running time: 89 MIN.**

With: Blandine Yameogo, Celestin Zongo, Claire Ilboudo, Daniel Kabore, Thomas Ngourma, Jules Taonssa, Abdoulaye Komboudri.

(Moor, French dialogue)

By JAY WEISSBERG

Firmly feminist in outlook and culture-changing in its aspirations, “Delwende” combines aspects of Greek tragedy with a critical eye toward the misuse of tradition in contempo Africa. Helmer S. Pierre Yameogo uses shelters for women accused of witchcraft to highlight the injustices of a society whose manipulation of superstition has tragic consequences for powerless women. While not on the same level as Ousmane Sembene’s outstanding “Protection,” which unspooled in the same slot last year, pic is a fine example of issue-based African cinema and should find a place on fest programs and Francophone screens.

Mostly shot in rural villages using non-actors for the small roles, pic opens with a thanksgiving celebration that smacks too much of natives showing off their model reservation to tourists. Once proper introductions are made, however, the voyeuristic feel disappears.

Sixteen-year-old Pougbila (Claire Ilboudo) is an exuberant dancer, which causes jealous peers to remark cattily on her seductive moves. At the same time a village child dies of unexplained causes, Pougbila tells her mother Napoko (Blandine Yameogo) that she’s been raped. She refuses to reveal the perpetrator, however, and won’t tell her father Diarrha (Celestin Zongo) about the rape.

As child deaths mount, the villagers speculate that a witch is behind the tragedies. Under the pretext of protecting his daughter from this tragedy, Diarrha hastens Pougbila’s impending marriage to a nearby villager, ignoring Napoko’s objections to the arranged match.

After Pougbila leaves with her future in-laws, village elders call soothsayer Raogo (Jules Taonssa) to find the witch who is causing the child deaths. Raogo uses a large totem pole (called a siongho) like a divining rod to find the woman casting the evil spell. A wooden figure is carried by Diarrha and a villager until they stop in front of



Blandine Yameogo’s Napoko, left, is forced to deal with patriarchal abuses in S. Pierre Yameogo’s “Delwende.”

Napoko, striking her on the head. Convinced this is a sign that she’s a witch, she’s chased out of town.

Forced to wander the countryside, the once proud and confident Napoko seeks refuge in one of the shelters in the capital, Ougadougou, for women accused of witchcraft. Pougbila hears of her mother’s fate and sets out to find her and confront the village elders with the truth.

Not surprisingly, men are cast in a decidedly unfavorable light here as either tradition-bound and ignorant or consciously wicked. The supposedly crazy Elie (Thomas Ngourma), however, watches the proceedings with a knowing eye. Constantly keeping his precious radio close at hand, it’s unclear whether he understands the French news broadcast announcing a meningitis outbreak in the area, or if he chooses to remain silent with his knowledge.

With Pougbila as guide, pic

takes on a documentary aspect as she walks, determined and erect, to the city, casting a searching eye on the blank-eyed misery of the outcasts. Like Sembene, Yameogo is enamored with strong women, and in his lead actresses he’s found a terrific conduit for expressing their nobility and force.

He nicely plays with the change of fortunes between the two women: as Napoko’s strength falters, Pougbila takes on her mother’s righteous determination. Ilboudo, a dancer making her film debut, seems to develop with each unflagging step she takes into the city, and Blandine Yameogo (helmer’s relation), is moving in her transition from commanding force to crushed spirit.

Initial pic quality is problematic, especially in darker scenes which appear muddy and washed out, but this improves soon after. Title comes from the name of one of the shelters for accused witches.