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*Essay***OUMOU SY: THE GRANDE DAME OF SENEGALESE FASHION**

BY ALEXANDRA MARSHALL

A look at the career of the fashion and costume designer, whose contributions to Djibril Diop Mambéty's *Hyenas* served to heighten the film's exquisite beauty.



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It took a few tries before the Senegalese fashion and costume designer Oumou Sy and I had a proper conversation. I had sent a text message to postpone our first phone appointment and only learned when we spoke the following day—she, from her atelier in Senegal's national Grand Theatre in Dakar, and I, at home in Paris—that she had never read my messages. The problem wasn't a faulty mobile network. Were connectivity really to falter, both Senegal and France, still economically and socially inter-reliant since Senegal's independence in 1960, would probably just shut down. Our lapse was more basic: "I didn't read your message because I can't read or write," Sy chided. The grande dame of Senegalese fashion, who is also an early Internet pioneer, theater entrepreneur, and costumer of choice for the nation's music and arts elite, the woman whose wardrobe, hair and makeup design lent Djibril Diop Mambéty's social satire *Hyenas* such purposeful surrealism and signifying style, did it all without knowing how to read and write. "She is very important for our country, a symbol, a reference in the artistic world," her frequent client, the singer Youssou N'Dour, has said. Sy's parcours makes you rethink your model of success.

"People who don't know how to read or write are more numerous in Senegal," Sy, now 67, explained of her decision not to go to school. (In fact, the balance has just tipped; UNESCO charts teenage and young adult literacy at just above 60 percent, though for the elderly, it is 27 percent.) "We're autodidacts, not stupid," she said. "You, you can't remember anything because you take notes. We use our memories. Our brains know how to function. I have no complex about it. Literacy isn't the whole of a person."

Sy explained that she stayed out of school out of respect for her father, who died when she was five years old. A devout Muslim in his youth and middle age, he participated in the pilgrimage to Mecca from the family home in Podor, on the border of the Sahel desert in the north of Senegal. "He'd be gone five years at a time: two and a half going, two and half coming back, on a camel or on foot," Sy said. "When I was born, he decided to stay home." As a child, Sy couldn't tolerate Podor's 110-in-the-shade heat and never took to her mother's breast, "so my father fed me camel's and goat's milk and Arabic gum. When he died, I felt all his force come into me. At the age of five I was no longer a child, I had the spirit and courage of a 25-year-old."

"I WATCHED WESTERNS AND GLADIATOR FILMS FOR INSPIRATION, AND THEN TO MOVE [THE VISUAL REFERENCES] CLOSER TO AFRICA, I LOOKED TO EGYPT."

A case in point: when she was 13, Sy opened Bagatelle Couture, a dressmaking workshop in St. Louis, the colonial city in the north, where her mother had moved with her new husband, a teacher. Having already refused one arranged marriage when she was nine—again Sy credited her father's indomitable will, internalized—she wasn't slowed down by her mother's objections to her starting a fashion career. At first, Sy used recuperated fabrics; soon her mother came around and bought her a sewing machine. With seamstresses now working three shifts of eight hours, Bagatelle Couture ran 24 hours a day, seven days a week, "because the client can't wait," Sy said. Even then, Sy worked in both traditional Senegalese dressmaking, with its dramatic and colorful volumes, and sleeker Western trends. "The Beatles were popular then," she recalled. "Les Copains. I always knew how to do traditional, but I kept the two styles apart." Decades later, as her sensibility evolved through her own couture collections and additional film and stage work, Sy would become known for how artfully she blended the two.

When Sy married at age 16, she began to split her time between St. Louis and Dakar, whose arts scene under the president, the poet Léopold Sédar Senghor, was thriving. Once established in Dakar as a dressmaker, giving classes at the École des Beaux Arts in Dakar, Ousmane Sembène, Senegal's premiere filmmaker, put Sy in touch with the Tunisian director Brahim Babai, where she did her first wardrobe work on his film *La nuit de la décennie*. A year later, when Mambéty hired her for *Hyenas*, Sy ran her first wardrobe department. Due to sudden budget cuts and a stop-and-start shooting schedule, Sy soon took on hair and makeup duties too. "It was a huge responsibility and I couldn't let Djibril down," she said. "You had to have a lot of nerve to handle him, but I couldn't refuse him anything. He was really special. We wanted to Africanize a Swiss story, but there was also a Western movie style. I watched Westerns and gladiator films for inspiration, and then to move [the visual references] closer to Africa, I looked to Egypt."

Among other things, *Hyenas* is a scathing critique of the postcolonial economic order. Sy has had her own experience with the tortured politics of multinational institutions. Shortly after Senegal became the second African country after South Africa to connect to the Internet, Sy wanted to extend connectivity beyond the elites and intellectuals in Dakar. "I wanted to do the Internet my way, for people who never went to school," she said. "We used to have a postman who would deliver letters to people on a bicycle. He'd read them aloud, take down people's replies and then go back to the post office and send them." Sy adapted that model to Metissacana, the Internet café and service provider in Dakar she founded in 1996. Like at Bagatelle Couture, she hired aides to work in three shifts of eight hours, showing people how to use the computer, and helping them send and receive emails around the clock.



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Sy's ultimate goal was to deliver service to the countryside, which conventional wisdom said couldn't be done. "They told me you connected to the Internet by telephone and electricity so I bought some telephone cables from Sonatel, the national telephone provider, who asked, 'Who is this girl who never went to school and she wants to do the Internet?'" She rented a bus and a big screen display and hired a rap group; together they toured the countryside giving demonstrations. "We came with the bus, we hooked up the cables to the telephone poles in the village center and we showed people how it worked. Later I went to a conference in Geneva where people who had never set foot in Africa said it wasn't ready for the Internet. I said, 'We're already open.'" Metissacana's services spread beyond Dakar but in 2002, the Internet business was shuttered. After offering connectivity at a below market price, when the company wasn't able to pay for rapidly growing server capacity, rather than extend them terms, France Telecom, who had bought Sonatel, cut them off.

Sy never stopped designing and agitating for African fashion. In 1997 she founded SIMOD, one of Dakar's two fashion weeks. The following year, she created the Carnaval de Dakar, an annual parade of costumed dancers, musicians and revelers, horses and buggies, and floats. She has taught at the École des Beaux Arts of Dakar, in Milan and Geneva, and founded Leydi, a fashion and costume design school in Dakar. In 2006, Sy received Senegal's Legion of Honor and in 2007, was part of a West African dream team, designing the costumes for the Opéra du Sahel's production of *Bintou Were*, by Mambéty's brother (also *Hyenas'* composer) Wasis Diop, with choreography by Germaine Acogny. Sy's costumes have been displayed in museums across Europe and the United States, most recently in 2016, as part of the show "Making Africa: A Continent of Contemporary Design" produced by the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao and the Vitra Design Museum, and in the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art's "Good as Gold" exhibition, which closes this September. Her designs are part of the permanent collection of the Museum of Black Civilizations in Dakar, where she is currently working to develop 3,000 examples of designs for African queens. "Inshallah," she tells me as we hang up the phone.

Alexandra Marshall has been covering travel, fashion, design, and food for 20 years and counting (the last 11 from Paris) for WSJ magazine, T: The New York Times Style Magazine, W, Harper's Bazaar, and Town & Country, among others. Before all is said and done, it is her goal to drive every back road in France; she is making excellent progress.



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