



Membership



Screenings



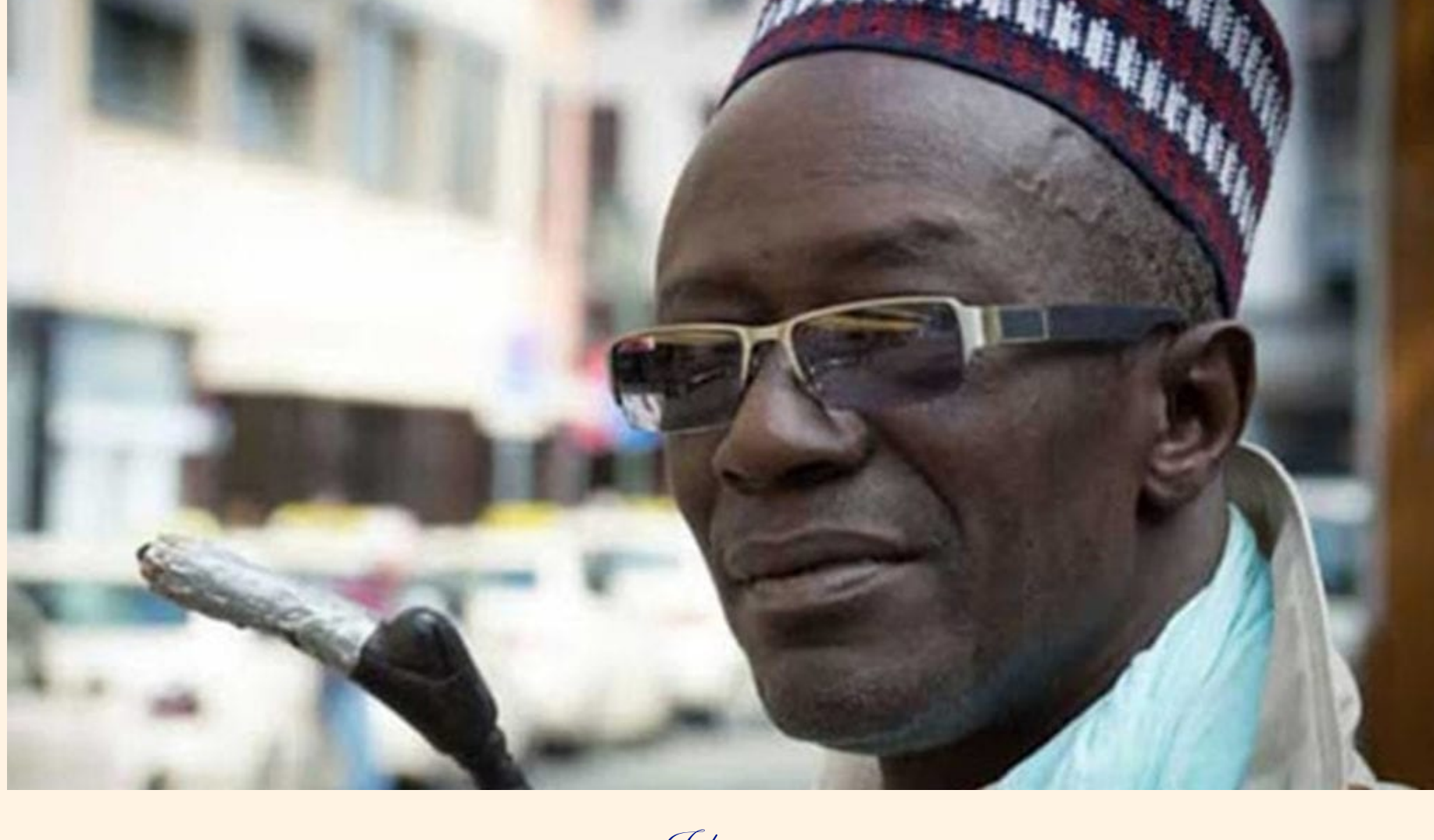
Journal



Metrograph Pictures



NYC Theater

*Interview***MOUSSA SENE ABSA**

BY AUSTIN DALE

The Dakar-based filmmaker and visual artist, who was a close friend of Djibril Diop Mambéty's, talks about coming on as the assistant director during the troubled production of *Hyenas*.



HYENAS

Djibril Diop Mambéty's second feature, *Hyenas*, premiered at the 1992 Cannes Film Festival after a troubled, stop-and-start production. The film generated immediate international recognition for the filmmaker, who was returning to Cannes nearly two decades after his prize-winning debut with *Touki Bouki*.

Freely adapted from *The Visit*, Freidrich Dürrenmatt's classic modernist drama, *Hyenas* is an uncanny satire set in Mambéty's hometown of Colobane, Senegal. The community has fallen on hard times, but it sees a way out when Linguère Ramatou returns. A native of Colobane, Ramatou has gone from prostitute to the world's richest woman, and she promises the town a fortune in exchange for the head of her ex-boyfriend, the popular local shopkeeper Drameah. What follows is a farcical and devastating critique of globalization and greed, and a visually sumptuous one at that.

Artists from across Senegal's film industry came together to get *Hyenas* across the finish line. One notable participant was Mambéty's close friend Moussa Sene Absa, the filmmaker and visual artist who served as assistant director on the movie. He spoke with us about Mambéty and the making of *Hyenas* from his home outside Dakar.

**HOW DID YOU COME TO BE INVOLVED WITH THE FILM AND WITH DJIBRIL?**

Here's how it happened. In fact, *Hyenas* was shot two times in two periods, and the first period was a big chaos. The producers stopped the film. I was in Paris, and one day I was talking with Alain Rosanéz [a producer on *Hyenas*], who asked me: "Could you help us with this show?" Because they saw me as very close to Djibril, and I was very sorry about Djibril's first shooting. So I said, "Yes, no problem."

**WHERE DID YOU TWO MEET?**

I met Djibril for the first time in Paris. This was around '85. At first sight, we just loved each other. We started to have a drink, and to talk. He asked me what I was doing in Paris, and I said I was here to make films. He said, "Welcome," and he had a very cynical way of saying things. Now and then we met in different venues, and I started to know him better. We were together in Chez L'Ami Pierre every, every day.

**AND YOU MUST HAVE BEEN FAMILIAR WITH HIS FILMS, *TOUKI BOUKI* FOR EXAMPLE.**

Oh, yes, I saw *Touki Bouki* before, during one show in Paris, and I was really thrilled by this film. This film was blowing my mind, and all the preconceptions I had about filmmaking and storytelling. I was very stung by the film.

**"NOBODY WILL MAKE FILMS LIKE DJIBRIL. HE WAS UNIQUE, AND HE IS GONE. WHAT IS REMAINING ARE SOME SEEDS THAT HE PUT IN THE FILM GROUND."****WERE YOU STUDYING FILM AT THE TIME?**

I didn't go to film school. When I came to Paris, I went to the Université Paris 7, and I started a Bachelor of Arts in film. I had to work to live, so I was a housekeeper in the surroundings of Paris. I wrote one script, and it was filmed. That was *Le Prix du Mensonge*. It was a short 18-minute film, and that was a hit. And everyone was asking me, "What is your next film?" So I was in school for three months, I made my first short, and then I was done.

**AND DJIBRIL KNEW YOUR FILMS.**

He knew my films, and also my writings. Sometimes I would show him my writings, and he would say, "Yeah, yeah, that's nice, but I think this character..." Because he loved characters. You can tell him hundreds of stories, but he will always talk to you about character. He was always thinking about, dreaming about one character especially. It could be a secondary character, but he would talk to you about the character that stood out to him.

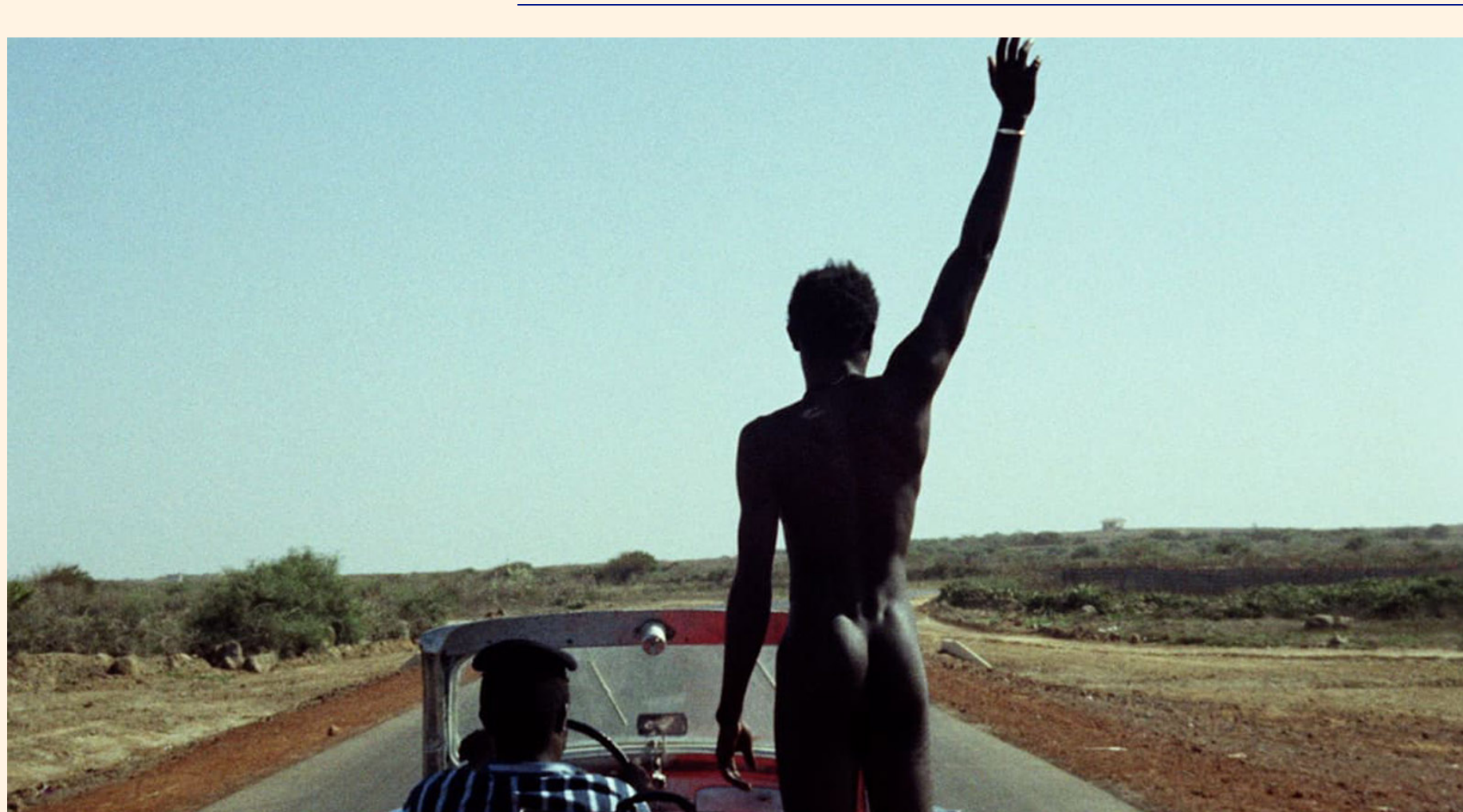
**THAT BRINGS ME TO *HYENAS*, WHICH HAS GREAT CHARACTERS. WHAT WAS IT ABOUT THAT STORY THAT EXCITED DJIBRIL?**

Djibril used to go to brothels around the ports of Dakar. Djibril was kind of a Renaissance man. He was always in the brothels, and not for the women. Just for the ambience. I've never seen Djibril trying to get a girl. I've never seen that. And I was really with him all the time. But he told me that when he was young, I think around the time that he started in film in the early '60s as an actor in the national theater, he was always with a group of artists in the city near the theater. All around, there were some bars and brothels and all of this underground life. And this group would go from bar to bar and brothel to brothel, making friends with prostitutes and buying them drinks. He was really interested in one special girl, who was always with him in this bar near the port. And he was very interested in her character, who dressed up every night, came in the bar, and then went with the client, and then the next day, came back. He was very curious about the life of this girl. And then he read Dürrenmatt's play, and from that point, the story of *Hyenas* came about, but regarding this young girl he knew in the surroundings of the port. It's a meeting of two stories in terms of aesthetic, and he used Dürrenmatt's play to give tribute to this girl.

**WHAT MADE IT SUCH A DIFFICULT PRODUCTION?**

There were two problems that happened. During the shooting, we had a big film stock drama. I don't remember if it was Kodak or AGFA, but the stock that he used was blurry. And I remember one day, we went to the lab together in Paris, and everything was moving and shaking in the middle of the frame, through the whole stock. And I saw Djibril, and I've never seen him like this. I'll always remember this face of blackness and darkness. He was just fading. And very silently, very sadly, he got out of the screening, and I saw him looking at the river, and he was just so sad. That moment tells me how fragile this work we're doing is. We're shooting in Africa, there's no film lab in Africa, and you have to send your film stock to Europe. You've got it when you're shooting, but you don't know if your film stock is good. It was a drama.

The second problem was when they stopped the shooting because of mismanagement and crew problems. Djibril liked to work in the way he wanted. He was a wild person. You have to understand that. One of his actors, Mansour [Diouf], said "*Djibril est un demiurge*." I don't know quite how to translate it in English, but it is to say that Djibril was half-god, half-human.



TOUKI BOUKI

**WHAT DO YOU THINK HE MEANT BY THAT?**

He meant that Djibril had this kindness and wildness at the same time. He was like an albatross. That's how I look at him myself: this big bird that flies so high, but who is able to see all the details of everything around.

***HYENAS* AND *TOUKI BOUKI* ARE BOTH AMONG THE BEST-KNOWN AFRICAN FILMS IN THE WEST. WHY DO YOU THINK THESE TWO FILMS AND DJIBRIL'S WORK STILL RESONATES ACROSS THE GLOBE?**

The main reason for me is that Djibril had a vision of his own storytelling. He had no references. He loved films, films like *High Noon*. He was always singing the song from this Western. But for me, the uniqueness of his voice is that he was using his own fundamentals, meaning he wasn't trying to do it like somebody else. He closes his eyes, and then something is happening in his eyes. In this darkness, he says that there is some light twinkling. And these lights are his own narrative.

He was not the kind of person who would say, "Oh, I'll do this long traveling shot." No, he would look at the scene, concentrate himself in what the scene is about, and when he was directing, you could see the half-god, half-human quality is important, because you don't recognize his face anymore. When you look at his face, his face is completely something else. He's indeed in this transmission of energy and vision that he wants his actors to have. And when he plays the scene, it's like he's in a theater.

If you look at African cinema, it was very formal and conformist. It could've been shot in Arizona, as far as storytelling and the lines of narration. But Djibril didn't care about left or right, up or down. He used reverse shots and many angles, and he makes you be with the character. You ended up being confused and thrilled by the way he shows you things. He'll show the same character moving left to right, then right to left, back and forth, and all these things are like he's choreographing his thoughts about this person. That's the choreography of his vision. That's what makes him very specific.

**WOULD YOU TALK A LITTLE ABOUT HIS INFLUENCE ON THE NEXT GENERATION OF SENEGALESE FILMMAKERS?**

His influence is huge for this new African generation. Most of these directors have looked at *Touki Bouki* and *Hyenas*, and at *Contras' City* and *Badou Boy*. Djibril's language is so unique, and everyone wanted to be the second prophet after Djibril. Many people use his language, but they don't have his state of mind, you understand? What Djibril is telling, he's telling it in a way that reflects his own personality. His films look like him. If you know Djibril, and you look at his films, they are one. His lyricism, his poetry, his drama, the music and sound. Djibril could stay three hours with you without saying one word. And he had just this look at one point, doesn't move from that point. He has a way of feeding himself that is unique, and you can't find that in other generations.

And coming to myself, the first time I shot a film, I remember him telling me: "Moussa, you have the territory, you have the history, and you have the land. This film has to look like all these things." When I look at these three points, I understand that he's saying to me that everybody has his own vision of life. We are different. You cannot look at life like Djibril, and nobody will make films like Djibril. He was unique, and he is gone. What is remaining are some seeds that he put in the film ground, that you can find in Mahamat Saleh Haroun from Chad, and in Abderrahmane Sissako. You can find some in me. And there are very young film makers in Senegal who have the same freedom of narration. That is Djibril's legacy. And they all say it. But Djibril is gone.

**AND HE DIED QUITE YOUNG.**

If he was still around, he would be making huge, huge films. He had all these huge projects in his head. I'm sure he could've told the terrible story of this continent. Because he's not just talking about this country. He's talking about the world. •

*Moussa Sene Absa is a Senegalese film director, editor, producer, screenwriter, painter, and songwriter whose directorial credits include Madame Brouette (2002), Teranga Blues (2007), and Yoolé (Le sacrifice) (2011).*



HYENAS

