

A Dark Swiss Comedy, Transported to Rural Senegal

By J. Hoberman

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Putting a sardonic spin on a modern classic of misanthropy, the movie “Hyenas” transposes a dark comedy by the Swiss dramatist Friedrich Durrenmatt to rural Senegal. Specifically, it sets the play, known in English as “The Visit,” in the dusty, drought-stricken town called Colobane after the birthplace of the film’s multitalented director, Djibril Diop Mambéty (1945-98).

“Hyenas” — which was made nearly two decades after Mambéty’s first feature, the African new-wave landmark “Touki Bouki” — was greeted with great anticipation when it was shown at the 1992 New York Film Festival. Largely unavailable since, it has been newly restored and is showing at Metrograph.

“The Visit,” described by The New York Times as “a bold, grisly drama of negativism” when it opened on Broadway to great acclaim in 1958, concerned the revenge of a once-despised, now enormously rich woman. Returning to the impoverished town that cast her out some decades before, she offers to reward its inhabitants if they take the life of the man — now a hapless, aging grocer — who long ago seduced and abandoned her. The townspeople are initially indignant, but ...

Mambéty sticks close to the original while transforming the drama into a village folk play, interspersed with songs and dances. (The score, which mixes traditional music with Western movie motifs, is by his younger brother, the singer-songwriter Wasis Diop.) He cast nonactors in the film’s two lead roles, with the lean and dignified Mansour Diouf as Dramaan Drameh, the chosen victim, and Ami Diakhate, discovered by Mambéty selling soup in a Dakar market, playing Linguère Ramatou, the old woman.

At once symbolic and concrete, the film is further punctuated by images of watchful animals — “frequent shots of fiery-eyed hyenas restlessly stalking the outskirts of the town like evil spirits alert to the scent of decay,” as Stephen Holden wrote in his New York Times review.

Durrenmatt’s play is, among other things, a satire of bourgeois democracy. “Hyenas” evokes a more archaic form of governance. Although the film’s ending, when Dramaan is put on trial, is reminiscent of Greek tragedy, the justice meted out observes local custom. The drama of “Hyenas” is given a specifically developing-world significance. Described as “richer than the World Bank,” Linguère effectively seduces the villagers with consumer goods like air- conditioners, refrigerators and TVs.

Not just money but modernization is the bait. (In interviews, Mambéty suggested that Linguère is the grown version of the radical student Anta who leaves Africa for Europe in “Touki Bouki.”) Not above such temptation, Mambéty pointedly casts himself in a small but significant role as a former judge who serves as Linguère’s retainer. The final shot has an earth mover bulldozing a field outside the town.

Mambéty never made another feature, although he did leave a 45-minute short meant to be part of a larger trilogy. A bold and splashy homage to Dakar’s street children, “The Little Girl Who Sold the Sun” (which can be streamed via Kanopy) is as affirmative as “Hyenas” is pessimistic.

Rewind is an occasional column covering revived, restored and rediscovered movies playing in New York’s repertory theaters.

Hyenas

April 26 through May 2 at Metrograph, Manhattan; 212-660-0312, metrograph.com.