

Recovering Hidden Histories: The 27th PanAfrican Art and Film Festival

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Ballades for Imperfect Heroes

In the late 19th century, Portugal's efforts to link its two neighbouring colonies of Angola and Mozambique were blocked by other imperialist powers. After ten years of intermittent war, and with the advent of a democratic government in Portugal when the Carnation Revolution brought an end to the Salazar dictatorship, Mozambique became independent in 1975 – only to fall into the throes of a bitter civil war between the pro-Marxist FRELIMO government and anti-Communist militias (RENAMO), during which one million people were killed, and several millions displaced. Economic chaos caused rampant poverty. In 2013-2014, hostilities resumed between the two camps, particularly in rural areas, where civil rights abuses have been reported.

Born in Mozambique, Sol de Carvalho studied cinema in the 1970s in Portugal, where he became a dedicated anti-Salazar activist. He returned to Portugal to join the FRELIMO independence movement, worked for the magazine *Tempo* in collaboration with award-winning writer Mia Couto, and, finally, in 1986, made the decision to become a filmmaker. One of the later works of his prolific career, *Mabata Bata* (2017) bears the marks of a fractured history and hybridity (like Mia Couto, who authored the short story that inspired the film, de Carvalho declares himself “white and African”,² and the film is a co-production with Portugal) while interweaving several planes of reality. Soldiers are roaming the countryside, stealing the cattle and abusing the peasants; land mines are littering the grazing grounds; young men cross the boarder to find better-paying jobs in South Africa – but then return to the village to find a wife. Young Azarias' uncle is one of these migrant workers who has set his eyes on the chieftain's daughter. Her father requests a dowry of fattened oxen. Azarias is prevented from attending school to mind the cattle. One afternoon, the most magnificent beast of the herd, the almost mythical Mabata Bata, explodes on a land mine. The boy is too frightened to return home, but, beyond this, there is the obscure feeling that with Mabata Bata, the identity, the life-style of the village has come to pass. It does not take long before Azarias, in his aimless wanderings, steps on a mine himself and becomes a ghost – the ghost of the old man he would had become had been able to outlive his childhood. “Azarias had dreams,” said the grandmother who had raised him.

So the stubborn old ghost comes back to the village. The only way out is to pacify him, by organising a ceremony during which his uncle has to apologise for having turned him into his herdsman. As the villagers resort to ancient, spiritual rituals to heal their collective grief, army platoons continue to roam, hungry, greedy, angry, nervous, ready to shoot at anything unusual...