

SaNoSi Productions, Ayizan Production, Merveilles Production
presents



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
UN CERTAIN REGARD
SÉLECTION OFFICIELLE 2021

FREDA

A film by **Gessica Généus**

NÉHÉMIE BASTIEN

DJANAÏNA FRANÇOIS FABIOLA RÉMY GAËLLE BIEN-AIMÉ JEAN JEAN ROLAPHTON MERCURE CANTAVE KERVEN

Written and directed by **GESSICA GÉNÉUS** Cinematography **KARINE AULNETTE** Sound **THOMAS VAN POTTENBERGE**

Editing **RODOLPHE MOLLA** Sound recording mixer **JOËL RANGON** Colourists **AMINE BERRADA et LAURENT NAVARRI**

Produced by **JEAN-MARIE GIGON GESSICA GÉNÉUS FAISSOL GNONLONFIN**

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FESTIVAL DE CANNES
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FREDA

A film by **Gessica Généus**

SCREENING

PALAIS DES FESTIVALS
Théâtre Claude Debussy

WEDNESDAY 14 JULY 11:00

Fiction - 2021 - Haïti / France / Benin – VOSTEN – Duration : 1h33

INTERNATIONAL SALES
SANOSI PRODUCTIONS

Jean-Marie Gigon
jean-marie.gigon@sanosi-productions.com
Emmanuel Papin / 00337 83 00 86 18
sales@sanosi-productions.com

INTERNATIONAL PRESS / CC PRESS

Celia Mahistre / 00336 24 83 01 02
Cilia Gonzalez / 00336 69 46 05 56
cc.bureaupresse@gmail.com

SaNoSi
PRODUCTIONS





SYNOPSIS

Freda lives with her family in a poor neighbourhood of Port-au-Prince. They make ends meet thanks to their small street shop. Faced with precarious living conditions and the rise of violence in Haiti, each of them wonders whether to stay or leave. Freda wants to believe in the future of her country.

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

The film talks about social, societal, feminist and political issues all at once – What was your initial goal when you started writing the film?

Above all, I wanted to show Haitian society from a female perspective because this perspective is generally overlooked. Women are under-represented and the analysis of the situation in our country is monopolised by men. I wanted to do it through fiction because that's how I began my acting career when I was 17. I wanted to portray female characters and try to understand their complexity, the complexity of making human choices, to show what men and women in Haiti face every day. To ask basic, concrete questions such as 'how do we get by from day to day and how do we keep going?'

What does a woman's perspective bring in particular compared to a man's?

In a society as patriarchal as ours, women are not treated equally to men. Women are silenced both in the public sphere and in daily life. My film echoes my experience as a young woman in my country.

In the film, the men come and go. They seem to just disappear.

It's simply a reflection of my life where men would disappear for various reasons. The behaviour of boys and girls is developed early on, during childhood. Men disappear and they are allowed to. They can leave and

go elsewhere, exist elsewhere. Whereas women are trapped and must stay where they are.

You have said that you wanted this film to be like an exorcism?

By exposing things you can see what should be kept and what should be removed in order to continue your journey. What was important in the screenplay wasn't the compelling characters, or this idea of making the right or wrong choices. It was to show the choices we make and to see where they lead us. Each character then makes choices depending on their needs and their values.

The story begins on the 1st November, the Day of the Dead.

The date is symbolic. The film talks about getting rid of the skeletons in the cupboard. The moment when you lay it all out. It's like a sort of autopsy of your body, your soul, your nightmares and your traumas. We push that all to one side and we see things as they really are, not how we want them to be. We don't have a choice. It's the same for my country. We have to start looking at Haiti. Looking at how we have transformed it. Because what Haiti is today is the result of our choices.

The three female characters represent the status of women in Haiti. But the writing goes beyond that, giving them contradictions, doubts and ambiguity.

I can't paint a picture of someone I don't know. Especially in this sort of film where the idea is to include some elements of real life. I don't have the notion of good and evil, of a good or a bad person. The nuances we see in the characters of Jeannette, Freda or Esther are nuances I understand. I've never known a prince charming or an omnipotent mother. I had to rewrite my fairy tales. I knew I had to work with what I had. And that is what the heroines of the film do.

The film is mostly in Creole. Was it important to make a creole-language film?

It was a real struggle. Fortunately, I had the support of my producer which allowed me to fulfil this ambition. As a former French colony and with Creole being derived from French, I was often asked to do the film directly in French. But I couldn't envisage doing the film in any language other than Creole. It's not about a personal belief or a desire to affirm my Negritude. I say 'Negritude' because for us, in Haiti, it's the most powerful word that exists. Freda had to be in Creole. There was no way I could do it any other way.

A question many of the characters in the film ask themselves is whether they should stay in Haiti or whether they should leave.

It's a question we all ask ourselves. This question of expatriation is a painful one for us. There is even an element of hypocrisy because some people affirm that they want to stay while at the same time they are preparing to leave. There are those who could never leave because they don't have the resources. They have to struggle on and confront those who prevent them from existing in their own country. It creates a terrible sense of frustration. This question is ubiquitous.

It's part of our everyday life. It defines how all Haitians feel today. Freda had to ask this question too. She is one of these young people who are unable to think of a future. Given that her daily life is punctuated by protests, burnt tyres and gunshots in the street, it is hard for her to imagine a future. As a human being, we have this need to think everything will be all right one day. But Freda, like other Haitians, is denied this illusion. Therefore this idea of an escape is inevitable.

In this film you portray another divide in Haitian society, that of two opposing cultures. Where Protestantism opposes Voodoo.

The two are completely opposed and the lack of dialogue between them can even lead to a form of violence. Today Protestantism governs our country. State authorities are absent so it's the Protestant church that manages hospitals and the administrative services where we apply for visas. The church is somewhere people go to find answers they can't find elsewhere. Which is why everyone turns to God but not necessarily because of their beliefs. The Protestant church acts as the state. It wages war against voodoo because when we don't have any answers, we blame the devil or malediction for everything bad that happens to us. Voodoo is used as a symbol of this malediction.



But it is so ingrained in our everyday lives that it is not possible to eradicate it or distance ourselves from it. This provokes a particularly violent personal conflict for many Haitians. They are torn between these two 'religions'.

What was your vision as a director?

I wanted to avoid manipulating reality as much as possible because I wanted my film to be a quest for restitution. There is of course some form of subjectivity because I'm doing it from my point of view. I listen, look, observe and talk a lot to challenge myself and to make sure I am where I am supposed to be. On reading the script, I was often criticised for using too many sets, too many locations, for going here, there and everywhere. But for me, we had to go where Freda would go. These places are part of her journey. They had to be included. We also had to film on location. We don't spend our time inside our homes because it's too hot and there is not enough space. So we live outside. It's our culture. Which is why the camera is often on the other side of the street when we film Jeannette's house. In our country there is always someone sitting across from your house, watching you. We observe our neighbours, we are a bit intrusive and there is no real privacy.

You come from documentary making. Did this help you to find the right perspective you talk about?

Yes definitely. My camera observes. It is not impersonal. Karine Aulnette, my director of photography has done lots of documentaries which gave me greater flexibility. Especially as I didn't have a big budget. My experience making documentaries gave me a certain freedom during filming that I wouldn't have had with a more academic background.

The characters are often all in the same shot. You try to avoid too many cuts in your film...

I wanted everyone to be in the shot at the same time. In real life we don't see one person after another. We constantly go back and forth. We are focused on the person speaking but when we hear a sound from behind we turn our head...which is why it seemed strange to use cuts. The scenes focus more on the movement of the group. Especially as my characters are often on screen together. I wanted to capture their energy.

How did you discover Néhémie Bastien who plays Freda?

For a long time I thought I would play Freda. I really wanted to. But when I was writing I realised I couldn't direct and play a role. At the time, there was a theatre festival going on and I went to see the actors. But I had supporting roles in mind. And then I saw Néhémie Bastien. She was playing an eight-year-old girl in *Victor ou les enfants au pouvoir* by Roger Vitrac even though she was twenty-five herself. It was totally surreal but she was brilliantly convincing. I had a light bulb moment. I saw Freda. Without a shadow of a doubt. She had never been to an audition and it was her first theatrical experience. When she read the script, she was uncomfortable because she felt exposed. She had perceived the complexity of Freda. And I knew she would transcend the notion of fiction by just being herself.

And Fabiola Rémy who plays Jeannette?

A few days later, I was in the building of the production company and I came across Fabiola Rémy. By chance. She was with a friend and she was walking through the courtyard. I saw her and I stood there watching her intently for a good five minutes. She started laughing hysterically and wondering who this crazy woman was staring at her. I used this laugh in the scene where she



is in the kitchen with Géraldine. I asked her to come and audition. She didn't know what an audition was but accepted to come. Despite her and Néhémie's lack of experience, I was never worried. I always knew it would work. I knew Néhémie and Fabiola would understand that this film was about them. About us. And that we just had to recreate our reality. So I changed the whole cast five days before filming. Everyone was worried except me (laughing).

Being an actress yourself, what was it like directing other actors?

I don't give much guidance. I like to capture what's real. Sometimes, I film the actors during rehearsal. On set, when we call "action" everyone is in position. I am too. So I like to get some natural shots. I take dialogue out when I feel it's no longer authentic. I particularly like being surprised by what the actors offer. I'm always looking for the "perfect shot". For that moment of perfect synergy. Which is why on set I like to let things happen naturally as much as possible. In my opinion it's a waste of time to be always stopping and correcting.

You have chosen an open ending, left it unresolved...

The idea is that the characters are still there, even when the film has ended. They are not dead. For me, giving the film a resolved ending is like killing the characters. The films I want to make are the types of films where we jump on board, we are immersed in the lives of a handful of characters and then we get off to go elsewhere. But the characters are still there and the train keeps going. For me it's not the end, it's just that we stop watching. But they are still there, trying to understand and make choices.

There is a deeply moving moment at the very end of the film with a long take on Jeannette. Was it written like this from the beginning?

No, I had no idea how to end the film, even when we had started filming! Where is Jeannette going? She is leaving. Is she coming back? Will we see her again? When we were filming the scene where she comes back, I didn't ask her to cry, I think it's a strange thing to ask. So we continued shooting. We simply couldn't move. I looked at her, completely lost and then she started crying. The street we were filming on which was usually really noisy, was completely silent. The silence lingered. And then I cried more than her. I was completely overwhelmed and I wasn't expecting it. I left the set. I couldn't control myself. I knew it was cinematic gold but there was also a real connection between everyone who was there. Living in a country where the mystical is as important as the reality, I felt like this moment was a gift from the gods.

PRODUCER'S STATEMENT OF INTENT

I met Gessica Génés in 2014 and I co-produced her film *Douvan jou ka leve* (*The Day Will Dawn*) with her (Ayizan Production, Haiti) and Rachèle Magloire (Productions Fanal, Haïti). In her first documentary film, Gessica captured the mood of Haitian society using parts of her own family history.

Gessica Génés is very popular in her country where she is a well-known singer and actress. When we first met, I was touched by the way she spoke about her own personal history and her ability to make it resonate with Haitian society as a whole.

Immediacy is part of the fabric of SaNoSi Productions. We produce most of our films within a short time-frame. This was true for *Libre*, by Michel Toesca and *Le Grand Bal*, by Laetitia Carton which were both produced in a short amount of time.

No doubt this is linked to my own background as a director of fictional films. When I worked as a filmmaker with other production companies, I suffered a lot from having to wait for financial decisions to be made. It became an obstacle for creativity. I like to

say that films are made to be “obeyed.” They have a momentum and an energy that should be respected. That of the director of course, but also of all those involved in making the film.

Libre and *Le Grand Bal* that we finished in 2018, both in official selection at the Cannes Film Festival the same year, were produced with this energy. The same goes for *Freda*: it was less than a year between receiving the first finished script at the beginning of 2019 and filming in January 2020 in Port-au-Prince.

This film brings together three companies from three different continents: Ayizan Productions, the company set up by Gessica Génés, who was very committed to the production of her film; Merveilles Production, a company based in Benin and created by Faissol Gnonlonfin, who we invited to join the project as a co-producer; as well as my company, SaNoSi Productions.

Freda is an important project for us. It's an opportunity to explore global issues through the cinema.

Jean-Marie Gigon
Producer





GESSICA GÉNÉS

Director

Gessica Génés is an actress, singer and director from Haiti. She began her career when she was 17 years old. After the earthquake in 2010, she became actively involved in the reconstruction of her country and she started working for the United Nations. She then won a scholarship to study at Acting International in Paris. She returned to Haiti and created her own production company, Ayizian Productions, to develop her own work.

Between 2014 and 2016 she directed *Vizaj Nou*, a series of short portraits of major figures from contemporary Haitian society. In 2017, her documentary film *Douvan jou ka leve* (*The Day Will Dawn*) won seven awards. It continues to be shown around the world.

Freda is her first feature film.



NÉHÉMIE BASTIEN

Freda

Néhémie Bastien is an up-and-coming singer in Haiti. The role of Freda is her first film role.

FABIOLA RÉMY

Jeannette

After having tried her hand at a range of professions, Fabiola plays Jeannette in her first film role.

DJANAÏNA FRANÇOIS

Esther

Djanaïna François trained in improvisation, writing and acting in New York at Ripley Grier Studios in 2015, then with the Barrow Group Theater Company in 2016, and at the Ted Bardy Acting Studio with the Meisner technique in 2016-2017. She has already featured in several feature films including *Skin Folk Love* by Eboni Munn, *Blackfunk Sandra* by Michael Presley and *Hunger Fate* by Corinne Spencer.

JEAN JEAN

Yeshua

Jean Jean is a Haitian-Dominican actor and filmmaker. He has starred in several feature films including *La Isla Rota - Broken Island* (2018) by Félix German, *Carpinteros* (2017) by José Maria, *Y a Dios que me perdone* (2017) by Angel Muniz, *Cuentos por Cobrar* (2016) by Ronni Castillo and *La Soga* (2009) by Josh Crook. He also directed *Printemps Now!* and the documentary film *Si bondye vle, Yuli (If God Wants Yul)* which won several awards for best documentary, including at the Caribbean Tales Festival in Toronto, the Rencontres Cinémas Martinique Festival and the Iberian Film Festival in Yale (USA).

GAËLLE BIEN-AIMÉ

Géraldine

Gaëlle Bien-Aimée is a journalist, actress, comedian and voice coach at the Acte acting school in Paris.

AYIZAN PRODUCTION is based in Port-au-Prince in Haiti. It was created by Gessica Généus in 2011 as a way to develop her own films. The company produced the documentary series *Vizaj nou*, in collaboration with Télévision Caraïbes, then her first documentary film *Douvan jou ka leve (The Day Will Dawn)*, co-produced with SaNoSi Productions, France Télévisions and Productions Fanal. *Freda* is the first feature film produced by Ayizan Production. .

SANOSI PRODUCTIONS is an independent production company based in the Centre-Val de Loire region of France. Since 2012, it has produced close to sixty films for film and television. Two of its feature films were in official selection at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival: *Libre*, by Michel Toesca (2018 Golden Eye special mention) and *Le Grand Bal*, by Laetitia Carton, nominated for a César in 2019 for best documentary. Two other feature films are in official selection at the 2021 Cannes Film Festival: *H6*, by Ye Ye (special screening) and *Freda*, by Gessica Généus (Un Certain Regard). More than half of the films produced by SaNoSi Productions are debut films, made by film-makers from around the world.

MERVEILLES PRODUCTION is an independent film and television production company based in Benin, created in 2011. With its global outlook, Merveilles Production develops committed partnerships with African film-makers and focuses on showcasing new film-makers from around the world, producing debut and second films.



CAST

NÉHÉMIE BASTIEN	FREDA
DJANAÏNA FRANÇOIS	ESTHER
FABIOLA RÉMY	JEANNETTE
GAËLLE BIEN-AIMÉ	GÉRALDINE
JEAN JEAN	YESHUA
ROLAPHTON MERCURE	D-FI
CANTAVE KERVEN	MOÏSE
PAULA CLERMONT PEAN	MARLÈNE

CREW

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY	GESSICA GÉNÉUS
CINEMATOGRAPHY	KARINE AULNETTE
SOUND	THOMAS VAN POTTTELBERGE
EDITING	RODOLPHE MOLLA
SOUND RECORDING MIXER	JOËL RANGON
COLOR-GRADING	AMINE BERRADA ET LAURENT NAVARRI
PRODUCED BY	JEAN-MARIE GIGON - SANOSI PRODUCTIONS
	GESSICA GÉNÉUS - AYIZAN PRODUCTION
	FAISSOL GNONLONFIN – MERVEILLES PRODUCTION
WITH THE SUPPORT OF	TV5MONDE
	CICLIC, RÉGION CENTRE-VAL DE LOIRE
	HUBERT BALS FUND OF INTERNATIONAL FILM
	FESTIVAL ROTTERDAM
	FONDS JEUNE CRÉATION FRANCOPHONE
	L'AIDE AU CINEMAS DU MONDE
	CNC
	INSTITUT FRANÇAIS
	LA RÉGION ILE-DE-FRANCE
	DOHA FILM INSTITUTE
	FONDS IMAGES DE LA FRANCOPHONIE
	L'AMBASSADE DE SUISSE EN RÉPUBLIQUE D'HAÏTI
	LA FONDATION FOKAL
INTERNATIONAL SALES	SANOSI PRODUCTIONS

