

DIRECTOR'S INTERVIEW by Christopher Vourlias

Q. *Night of the Kings* is built around a memory you have of a childhood visit to Abidjan's notorious MACA prison. Can you tell us about that memory?

A. As a child, I'd go once a week along the edge of Banco Forest in a shared taxi to go visit my mother who was incarcerated there for political reasons. As there are no visiting rooms at MACA, I waited among the prisoners who freely circulated amid the visitors. I was listening to this prison's language. It was a world that I loved to observe, even if I wasn't able to decode everything. I had the impression of being at the court of some archaic kingdom with all its princes and lackeys... MACA is therefore a prison which left me with strong images and memories. *Night Of The Kings* is fed with these images to expose the prison from the inside, from the inmates' point of view.

Q. The film certainly looks like it's shot inside a correctional facility. Did you use an actual prison (or former prison) as the setting of the film? If so, what sort of cooperation did you need from local authorities to shoot there?

A. The outside sequences of the prison have been shot at the actual MACA. This prison being a very sensitive place with political prisoners still being incarcerated, we wouldn't have been able to shoot the film without a real cooperation with the penitentiary administration and the ministry of Culture which always supported the project. As for the inside of the prison, it has been reproduced in two colonial buildings of Grand-Bassam, a city located one hour from Abidjan. Along with my set designer, Samuel Teisseire, we wanted to keep the spirit and some very distinctive things about the MACA, like the very peculiar shape of the windows, but we didn't try to reproduce the prison exactly as it is. Many African prisons inspired me for the inside sequences. For example, the paintings on the walls are reproductions of existing paintings. I didn't want décoration or anything superfluous because the elements from the prison world have to be useful. This is certainly why it feels like a real prison.

Q. The movie offers a very realistic portrait of prison life--a world with its own histories, hierarchies, and rituals. What was the research process like? Did you speak to many prisoners about their experiences?

A. *Night Of The Kings* originally comes from a discussion I had with a childhood friend coming out of the MACA prison. He's the one who told me about the "Roman" ritual where they choose a prisoner who has to tell stories. So the story of the film is definitely based on a real tradition there is at MACA. I immediately pictured the setup and imagined a character in the middle of this arena. Prison always got me interested as a place where the balance of power we can find in our societies is being experimented. It's even more true when it comes to unequal societies. Being sent to prison today in Africa is something which can happen easily, either because you are poor or because you are being made an example to ensure the laws are

respected. African prisons are full of young people being incarcerated for years in collective cells without being tried. But beyond this social reality, my researches have been centered around the prison as a place where narratives are being created.