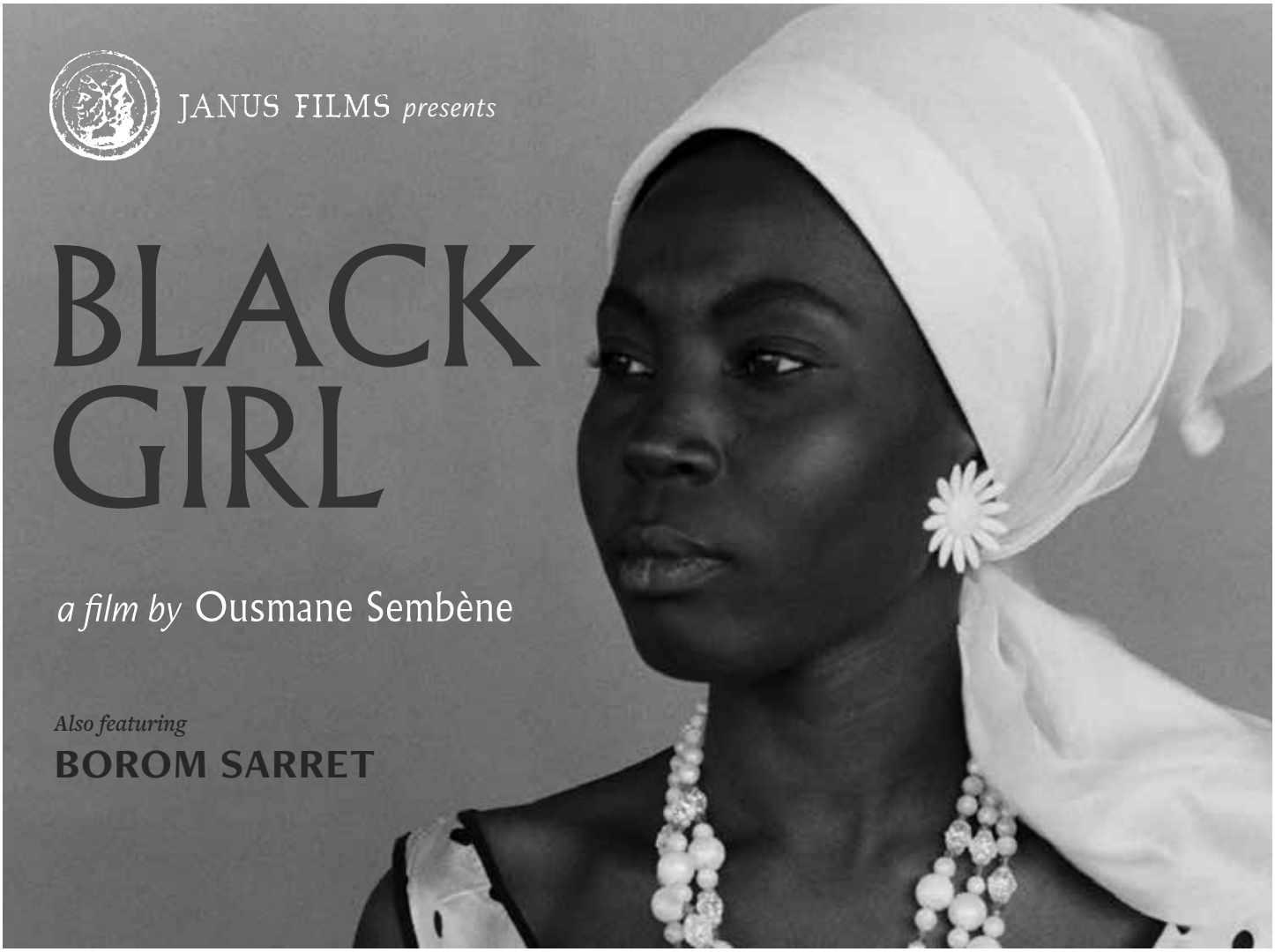

JANUS FILMS *presents*

BLACK GIRL

a film by Ousmane Sembène

Also featuring

BOROM SARRET

BLACK GIRL

Ousmane Sembène, one of the greatest and most groundbreaking filmmakers who ever lived as well as the most internationally renowned African director of the twentieth century, made his feature debut in 1966 with the brilliant and stirring *Black Girl* (*La noire de . . .*). Sembène, who was also an acclaimed novelist in his native Senegal, transforms a deceptively simple plot—about a young Senegalese woman who moves to France to work for a wealthy white couple and finds that life in their small apartment becomes a prison, both figuratively and literally—into a complexly layered critique of the lingering colonialist mind set of a supposedly postcolonial world. Featuring a moving central performance by Mbissine Thérèse Diop, *Black Girl* is a harrowing human drama as well as a radical political statement—and one of the essential films of the 1960s.

Senegal • 1966 • 65 minutes • Black & White • In French with English subtitles • 1.33:1 aspect ratio • SCREENING FORMAT??

BOROM SARRET

Legendary Senegalese director Ousmane Sembène's first film, 1963's *Borom sarret,* was also one of the first movies ever made by a black African filmmaker. An urgent and beautifully spare work of realism, it bears witness to the entrenched sociopolitical conflicts of postcolonial Senegal by following the daily struggles of a cart driver from a small village.

Senegal • 1963 • 18 minutes • Black & White • In French and Wolof with English subtitles • 1.33:1 aspect ratio • SCREENING FORMAT??

Restored by Cineteca di Bologna/L'Immagine Ritrovata laboratory, in association with the Sembène estate; INA, Institut national de l'audiovisuel; Éclair Laboratories, and the Centre National de la Cinématographie. Restoration funded by The Film Foundation's World Cinema Project.

Booking Inquiries: Janus Films
booking@janusfilms.com • 212-756-8761

Press Contact: Ryan Werner
rtwerner@me.com • 917-254-7653

OUSMANE SEMBÈNE, *BLACK GIRL*, AND BRINGING AFRICA TO THE WORLD

Though he belongs in the company of such globally renowned figures as Jean-Luc Godard, Nagisa Oshima, Satyajit Ray, Jean Renoir, and Agnès Varda in the canon of groundbreaking cinematic artists of the twentieth century, Ousmane Sembène is unknown to most Western viewers. This may be due in part to the fact that African cinema, still new compared to most of the national film industries of the rest of the world, remains in the shadows. For much of the twentieth century, screen portrayals of the sub-Saharan continent, informed by decades of colonialism, exoticized and objectified the land and its people. In countries colonized by France, it was difficult for Africans to produce their own movies at all, as a 1934 law had made such work subject to the approval and control of white European interests. Cinematic images thus merely reinforced the myopic and racist vision of Africa as the "dark continent," and any kind of authentic cinematic expression by native citizens of African countries was effectively limited, even as other nations around the world established distinct filmic perspectives.

Upon its decolonization in 1960, Senegal became the first of these countries to begin to find a cinematic voice, thanks in great part to Ousmane Sembène. Though his fellow Senegalese filmmaker Paulin Soumanou Vieyra had directed what is widely considered the first Francophone film made by a black African, *Afrique sur Seine,* in 1955, Sembène's work represented an exciting new political point of view, one committed to capturing the essence and reality of Africa on-screen.

Sembène's had already established himself as a poet, essayist, and fiction writer by 1961, when he decided to try filmmaking. He had recently returned to a newly independent Senegal after living for more than a decade in Marseilles, where he had been energized by the left-wing, anticolonialist political movement. And he had come to believe that the moving images and sounds of cinema had a power to reach audiences across Africa, many of whom were illiterate, far beyond that of the written word. He determined to create a cinema about and for Africans, steeped in their history, landscapes, politics, and storytelling traditions. At nearly forty years old, he used scholarship money to travel to Moscow, where he learned filmmaking at the Gorky Film Studio.

After returning to Senegal in 1962, Sembène made his first film, *Borom sarret,* using a Soviet camera he had brought back from Moscow. Following the daily routine of an impoverished cart driver in Dakar trying to make ends meet, the film shows the conflicts of postcolonial Senegal, including its class divisions, and offers a fairly bleak vision of the economic disparity between the country's rural and urban areas. *Borom sarret* also establishes the calm, humane realism that would also characterize the director's second short film, *Niaye* (1964), about an incestuous pregnancy that scandalizes a village.

In 1966, Sembène made his first fully realized political and artistic triumph, *Black Girl* (*La noire de . . .*), a pioneering masterpiece about the postcolonial condition and the persistence of ingrained racism in Europe. Sembène based his film on a true-life tragedy he'd read about in a French newspaper involving the suicide of a black maid. Though it takes place in the resort town of Antibes, the film was shot entirely in Dakar. With its simple but heartrending, emotionally complex story about a young Senegalese woman (Mbissine Thérèse Diop) who leaves her homeland to work as a servant for a young white couple in Southern France, Sembène masterfully communicates ideas about personal and political power struggles and unavoidable social legacies.

Black Girl was the film that brought Sembène to an international audience. After it was shown and warmly received at the Festival Mondiale des Arts Nègres in Dakar, it went on to win both the Tanit d'Or (the grand prize at the Carthage Film Festival) and France's prestigious annual Prix Jean Vigo. *Black Girl* is thus remembered as the first sub-Saharan African film to reach audiences in Europe, and as one of the most important films of that radical decade of world filmmaking. Much as Satyajit Ray had introduced the world to an authentic vision of India via screenings of *Pather Panchali* in New York and Cannes in 1955, Sembène was offering international audiences a perspective they had not seen represented on-screen before: this was not a liberal Westerner's take on the evils of colonialism but a black African artist's point of view about the seemingly insurmountable racism engendered by decade upon decade of white colonialist domination.

Despite *Black Girl*'s breaking through to international viewers, making cinema that would be palatable for Westerners was never a priority for Sembène. He refused to pander to the international market and was committed to remaining an African filmmaker first and foremost. In postcolonial Africa, independence from the West was of paramount importance. This meant creating both images and words for African people, using Senegal's languages of Wolof and Jola for his main dialogue, and paying tribute to African storytelling traditions in his narratives. In his wake, such African directors as Ababacar Samb-Makharam, Mahama Johnson Traoré, and Djibril Diop Mambéty would find their voices as well. These filmmakers are gradually becoming better known to viewers in the West, but Ousmane Sembène remains the towering figure, whose major artistic accomplishments continued through 2004 and his powerful final film, *Moolaadé.* "Africa is my audience," Sembène once wrote, and though he would prove an influential force, inspiring filmmakers around the world, he never lost sight of that audience.

OUSMANE SEMBÈNE FILMOGRAPHY

1963 *Borom sarret* (short)
1963 *The Sonhrai Empire* (short)
1966 *Black Girl*
1968 *Mandabi*
1970 *Tauw* (short)
1971 *Emitaï*
1975 *Xala*
1977 *Ceddo*
1988 *Camp de Thiaroye*
1992 *Guelwaar*
2001 *Faat Kiné*
2004 *Moolaadé*

OUSMANE SEMBÈNE BIOGRAPHY

The son of a fisherman, Ousmane Sembène was born in 1923 in the Casamance region of southern Senegal. Sembène was expelled from school in 1936 for insubordination and would never complete a formal education. After this, he was sent to Dakar, the capital of Senegal and the headquarters of French West Africa, to live with his father's relatives. In Dakar, he worked various manual labor jobs, including as a bricklayer and a mechanic, but he also first discovered cinema in the city's segregated movie houses. In 1944, like many other young Africans, he was called on to aid in the fight against the German occupation of France; his position was as a chauffeur for a colonial infantry unit in Niger. After a brief postwar return to Dakar, Sembène decided to migrate to France to work, and he resided in the port city Marseilles for over a decade.

Toiling at the city's docks by day (unloading ships, which was literally backbreaking work: at one point he broke some vertebrae, necessitating a lengthy recovery) and attending political meetings at night, Sembène became fervently committed to left-wing causes while in Marseilles. He enrolled in the country's largest workers' union, immersed himself in Marxist literature, and became intimately familiar with the city's many museums and theaters. He also spoke passionately against colonialism and the ongoing French wars in Indochina and Korea, and he became obsessed with the idea of a free Africa—an Africa that had its own past and future. "I'm going to restore Africa's stories to Africans," he once said, and this became his mission. In 1956, at the age of thirty-three, he published his first work, *Liberté,* a long poem that is about his feelings of estrangement from art and beauty and imagines a post-independence Africa. In addition to more poetry, he soon began to write short stories, essays, and books. His first novel, *Le docker noir,* also published in 1956, concerns a workers' strike and was based on his own experiences.

In 1960, Sembène left Marseilles and returned to post-independence Senegal. Soon afterward, he decided to make films, realizing that he could reach more people that way. He traveled to Moscow and studied filmmaking at the Gorky Studios, as a student of Soviet director Marc Donskoï. Armed with an old Soviet camera, Sembène came home to Senegal once again and made his first two short films, *Borom sarret* (1963) and *Niaye* (1964). His 1966 debut feature, *Black Girl* (*La noire de . . .*), broke new ground by being the first African film to be widely screened for Western viewers, even winning France's prestigious Prix Jean Vigo. In 1968, he released *Mandabi,* whose dialogue was spoken in Senegal's dominant language of Wolof; the film proved popular with African as well as international viewers, winning a special jury prize at the Venice Film Festival.

Throughout the seventies, Sembène was a cinematic force, directing *Emitai* (1973), *Xala* (1974), and *Ceddo* (1976)—films about, variously, religion, sex, and war, each considered a major classic of African cinema. He continued to remain relevant through the eighties and nineties and into the twenty-first century, with the Venice grand jury prize winner *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988), *Guelwaar* (1992), and two feminist works: *Faat-Kine* (2000) and *Moolaadé* (2004), his final film. Sembène died in 2007 at the age of eighty-four, with twelve films, five novels, five short story collections, and TKTK volumes of poetry to his name. He is today remembered as more than just a great filmmaker: he is a symbol of political progressiveness, radical independence, and uncompromised art.

IN SEMBÈNE'S WORDS

On transitioning from author to filmmaker:
"I realized that with a book, especially in Africa where illiteracy is known to prevail, I could only touch a limited number of people. I became aware that film, on the contrary, was likely to reach broad masses."

On his filmmaking philosophy:
"I am not a leftist intellectual. Moreover I am not an intellectual at all. I regard the cinema primarily as a political instrument of action. I am for scientific socialism. However, as I always continue to specify, I am not for "socialist realism," nor for a "cinema of signs" with slogans and demonstrations."

On working with women:
"It's often with women that I find myself doing the most improvisation. I usually give them more freedom than I give the guys. Because the women usually are playing themselves, their own roles, and on paper I'm very limited by the fact that I don't know them very well. They modify the scenario accordingly. And that, I think, brings something to the act of creation."

On cutting **Black Girl** *into a short:*
"I started to make this film without the authorization of the National Center of French Cinema. However, as it was a co-production between Dakar and Les Actualities Francaises it needed one. Due to a vicious circle I could not obtain authorization because I did not have my professional card since to obtain one it is necessary to have already made a film or to be an assistant (which I did not want to be). Finally we realized that by presenting *Black Girl* as a short (less than one hour) it would be easier to regularize the situation with the CNC. In the beginning, i.e. in the time of the scenario, the film was meant to be about an hour and a half. So I cut all the color scenes."

On screening **Black Girl** *in Dakar:*
"To show it to an international film audience in Dakar, that was something. For me, being an artist has nothing to do with applause or honors. What matters is getting your message to your intended audience. With Black Girl I felt I'd done my job as an artist."