

THE LONG JOURNEY HOME

Helle Toft Jensen's *Hotel of Dreams* is the poignant story of a Europeanised African returning to the old country and ultimately rediscovering his cultural roots.

BY NIKOLAJ MANGURTEN LASSEN

The title, *Hotel of Dreams*, precisely encapsulates the subject of Helle Toft Jensen's documentary from Senegal. After many years in Belgium, a middle-aged Senegalese man, Jean Marie da Sylva, known as Jeannot, returns to the village of Popenguine to build a hotel and bring tourists and prosperity to the small community.

"I remember the first time I came to Popenguine," he says. "I guess I was around 10 years old. I had just lost my father. My mother was alive, but she was very poor." The village made an impression on the impoverished boy, who left to seek his fortune in Belgium when he was 17. He married and had a child with a wealthy Belgian woman, but they even-

tually divorced and after 25 years in Europe, Jeannot decided to return to Senegal as an entrepreneur and build the hotel of his dreams.

The film tracks the construction of the hotel in this sleepy, Edenic village on the coast. Already in the initial phases, conflicts emerge. Many people in the village, not least the schoolteacher Karim and the council of elders, are sceptical about the big construction project and the stranger, Jeannot, with his European ways and "aloofness." Jeannot pushes ahead with his plans, regardless, even as the moments when he sits staring into the dark, alone with his thoughts, get more frequent.

Once the hotel is finished, however, the realities for a modern hotel in this small town turn out to be a far cry from Jeannot's dreams. Attracting tourists is exceedingly difficult and daily operation of the hotel is a puzzle resisting easy solution. On top of everything come Jeannot's personal troubles fitting in and being accepted after two and a half decades in Belgium. All his problems are connected.

Jeannot has become more deeply Europeanised than he himself realises. He talks about his countrymen as strangers and his very appearance sets him apart from the people he wants to be taken in and accepted by. "I lived in Belgium for 25 years. An African feels very alone in Europe. But I feel very alone here, too," he says with chagrin.

The outlook for Jeannot is grim. Bill collectors are lining up outside his door. Then Birane, the local taxi driver, looks him up. Birane is naturally positive about tourism and wants the hotel project to succeed. He sets up a meeting between Jeannot and the village council where they examine and verbalise their cooperation problems. The parties move a step closer together, sparking hope for the returning immigrant's dream project.

Hotel of Dreams is a thought-provoking film - funny, serious and insightful. Jumping off from the conflict between African and European, the film opens up a discussion of globalisation, raising issues of identity, culture and ethnicity. ■



Photo: Sonja Iskov



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LIVING DESPITE IT ALL

The image of the Third World is infuriatingly simplistic, Helle Toft Jensen says. This documentarian makes her films out of political and moral indignation.

BY NIKOLAJ MANGURTEN LASSEN

"I really hadn't planned to make a film in Senegal, but I was adopting a Senegalese child. One of my best friends is originally from Popenguine, and I was there on personal business. While I was there, I heard the rumours that someone wanted to build a big hotel in the village.

"The next thing that happens is I see this giant concrete block rise up in the town's central square. It immediately triggered all my prejudices about entrepreneurial Europeans out to make a buck, and I got the idea to make a film about the arrival of tourism.

"Of course, I soon realised that a Senegalese person was building the hotel. So my prejudice flies out the window. But the story remains, because I'm still curious about the idea itself: What happens when a mogul comes to town? Will everything be changed by tourism? Will people's values shift?"

FROM OUTER TO INNER STORY

So the film moves from an "outer" to a more "inner" story?

"Yes, when the story about the town and its development is illuminated through Jeannot and his dilemmas, the angle changes and it becomes a more universally human story about coming 'back home.' Maybe my fascination with Jeannot, the returning immigrant, and his personal story is also my own unconscious way of preparing myself for my son's future identity issues."

The characters in the film seem very comfortable with the camera and the fact that they are being filmed. What was your procedure?

"I personally shot almost half of *Hotel of Dreams*.

It was important for me to work with a small Senegalese crew and shoot the whole thing over an extended period. So we ended up making six visits to Popenguine of 8-10 days each over a period of three years. There were always just three of us (Fatoumata Kandé Senghor, the line producer, Serigne Drame or Jean Diouf as cameraman and myself) and from the beginning we very clearly stated what we were there to do.

"Another important factor was that we never paid people to be in the film, which is actually rather unusual. Instead, we paid people for their services and participation with different kinds of gifts. This could be anything from bags of rice and blankets to paying someone's electric bill or springing for de-lousing treatments, wine, jewellery, Viagra or birth

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control pills - things people specifically, personally wanted. That way, we made sure that our being there had a positive influence. Instead of just handing out money, which might be the cause of envy and dissension, these gifts were something people could enjoy in the here and now as well as in a somewhat bigger perspective. So we avoided falling into the classic role of 'whites with money.'

"We held the world premiere of the film last April in Popenguine, in the central square right next to Jeannot's hotel. A crowd of 600 people showed

up to watch the film and I brought my son along, too, so it was a big event for everybody. Jeannot was introduced and in one fell swoop was established in everyone's mind. The film and the dialogue we began with the shooting and rounded off with the public premiere have had a positive effect on the village. We got to tell their story, while we were also able to give something back to them. That means a lot to me as a filmmaker."

FUELLED BY ANGER

You generally seem to get very emotionally engaged in your story. How did you get into filmmaking?

"When I was young, I travelled around the world and saw huge inequality, but also great power and pride that impressed me. When I encountered the Danish photographer Jacob Holdt's *American Pictures*, my partner and I decided that was the kind of thing we wanted to do. But we wanted to seek out efforts to create a better world. That's why we were in Nicaragua when revolution broke out in 1979 and could report on events at close range, which resulted in *Frit fædreland - eller dø* (translates: *Free Fatherland or Death*.) It was my debut and it really broke through to the media world, laying the foundation for SPOR MEDIA."

What's the thread in your production?

"I make films out of moral and political motivation. I'm angry about the world's inequality. You could say that 'living despite it all' is the subtext of all my films. I never add a voiceover to my films; it's very important for me to have people speak for themselves. My goal is to create a different representation of people from Third World countries than the prevailing media image, because I have no use for victimisation. I want the audience to be challenged and experience that white Westerners can easily mirror themselves in black people and their emotions and dreams." ■

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SPOR MEDIA

Founded 1980 as an independent association aimed at promoting world cultures through educational work, film projects, festivals and other cultural events. Facilitates distribution of documentaries and fiction made by African, Asian and Latin American filmmakers.

HELLE TOFT JENSEN

Born 1957, Denmark. Director, co-director and producer of SPOR MEDIA productions. Directed and produced several documentaries since 1979.



Photo: Sonja Iskov