

Ben Mendelsohn, Edie Falco, and Bill Camp. And in recent years, she's branched out in surprising ways, earning her first and only Oscar nomination for her screenplay for *Can You Ever Forgive Me?* (2018), the excellent biopic of biographer and forger Lee Israel, and bringing the female perspective to Ridley Scott's criminally overlooked *The Last Duel* (2021), in a screenplay collaboration with Matt Damon and Ben Affleck.

In *You Hurt My Feelings*, Louis-Dreyfus's Beth gets a happy ending (sort of). Her novel is published, and the cover blurb calls it "a terrific read." Then she looks over to a rival novel in the bookstore window proclaimed as "brilliant" and smirks. Holofcener's own brilliant streak continues, despite any hurt feelings she may harbor from critics past and present.—Kevin Lally

## Saint Omer

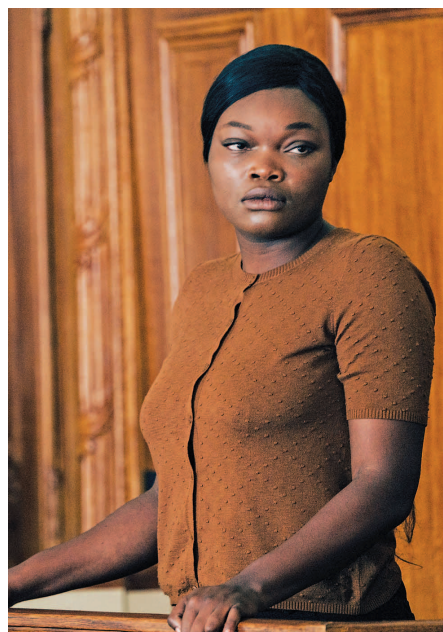
**Produced by Toufik Ayadi and Christophe Barral; directed by Alice Diop; screenplay by Alice Diop, Amrita David, and Marie NDiaye; cinematography by Claire Mathon; production design by Anna Le Mouël; editing by Amrita David; music by Thibault Deboaisne; starring Kayije Kagame, Guslagie Malanda, Valérie Dréville, Aurélie Petit, and Xavier Maly. Color, 122 min., French, Wolof and Italian dialogue with English subtitles, 2022. A Super release, [www.superltd.com](http://www.superltd.com).**

*Saint Omer* observes a rising Parisian academic, Rama (Kayije Kagame), who journeys to the remote subprefecture of Saint-Omer to attend the trial of Laurence Coly (Guslagie Malanda), a mature university student accused of drowning her fifteen-month-old daughter in the North Sea. Although Laurence admits to the murder before the court, she pleads not guilty so the trial can ensue. In reply to the chief judge's question about why she killed her daughter, Laurence says, "I hope this trial will give me the answer." Several possible answers are duly debated throughout the film, from selfishness to social dislocation, from simple madness to the influence of the occult.

Soon after the opening scene, an eerie dream establishes the initial link between Rama and Laurence. We see Rama lecturing to her students on Marguerite Duras's descriptions of the *femme tondu*e—French women accused of having romantic affairs with German soldiers during the Occupation—in her *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) screenplay. The heads of these women were shaved in public after the liberation, a humiliating spectacle witnessed by many Frenchmen whose memberships in the resistance were of a very recent issuance. After showing scenes from *Hiroshima mon amour* depicting these acts, Rama declares that she is most interested in how Duras "uses the power of narrative to sublimate reality." This could be read as a statement of intent from director Alice Diop, who proceeds to do exactly this with Laurence's case.

The trial at the heart of *Saint Omer* is based on a real event that Diop attended in 2016. Like Laurence, Fabienne Kabou was accused of killing the infant daughter she had with a much older, white partner. Kabou, like Laurence, was also born in Senegal, moved to France for university studies, and had started writing a thesis on the enigmatic and difficult philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. But the film is much more ambitious and unpredictable than what one might expect from a documentarian's first narrative feature derived from such an experience. First, it is not at all a courtroom drama: the basic facts of the case are never in doubt. The witnesses we hear from, including Luc Dumontet (Xavier Maly), Laurence's doddering ex-boyfriend and father of the dead infant, are not especially persuasive either way. Nor is *Saint Omer* a morality play of any height of brow: there is no inherent significance to the trial itself that transcends provincial interest. We never learn the verdict and it is perfectly beside the point. The trial merely provides the pretense for narrative sublimating reality.

Rama is an aspiring Black female scholar in a country where formal egalitarianism is as conspicuously absent as it is ostentatiously declaimed. We learn through the proceedings of the trial that Laurence's ambitions were in part thwarted by inconsistent, racialized expectations of "Frenchness" in the colony and "Africanness" in France. In testimony, a former academic advisor criticizes Laurence's interest in Wittgenstein, whose "philosophy is not about her." "Why not choose someone closer to her own culture?" she asks. The racist overtones are unmistakable, but there is a deeper irony to this sentiment coming from the French elite. In navigating the colonial relationship



In *Saint Omer*, Laurence Coly (Guslagie Malanda) is on trial for drowning her own child.

imposed by France, Laurence's mother never allowed her daughter to absorb African culture. We learn that she insisted that Laurence speak only French and receive a classical education. Laurence's provocation is in her being an unmistakable product of France, with her mother's active suppression of the Wolof language serving as a cutting of the chord with Senegal. In a superbly understated scene, we see Laurence's mother buying every newspaper covering the trial, out of apparent pride of their mentioning her daughter's erudition and impeccable French.

What appear to be contradictions in Laurence's testimony—a distant relationship with her mother that also involves weekly phone calls, a happy childhood from which she nevertheless needed to escape—are better understood as symptoms of colonial dislocation and shattered identity. The internal dissonance never stops gnawing away at her. Early in her testimony, Laurence describes visiting Senegal for her beloved grandmother's funeral and having her outsider status accentuated. "There, everyone was weird around me. They called me an 'Oreo' because I acted like a white Parisian woman." This scene recalls Frantz Fanon's discussion of the returnee to the colonies in *Black Skin, White Masks*: "The new returnee, as soon as he sets foot on the island, asserts himself; he answers only in French and often no longer understands Creole." Fanon was speaking of the Antilles but notes that "this same behavior can be found in any race subjected to colonization."

Diop is less interested in the politics of Laurence's case than she is in the relationship between daughter and mother, which also approximates the distance between France and its former colony Senegal, where Laurence was born and where Diop's family also originates. (The vexed relationships between parents and children engendered by French colonialism are sensitively explored in Diop's 2021 documentary, *Nous*.)

We do not learn much about Rama's upbringing, but Diop's direction—in the dexterous reaction shots between Rama and Laurence in the courtroom, and the seamless flow from flashbacks to the present—gives the viewer every reason to see substantial similarities with Laurence's. (The film's cinematography is by Claire Mathon, who also filmed 2021's *Petite Maman*.) Rama's reactions to Laurence's testimony early on are emotional but composed, yet this poise crumbles as recognition sets in. We also glimpse flashbacks and family videos that give a sense of Rama's psyche. When Rama finally meets Laurence's mother for lunch during the trial, the most critical affinities between the woman on trial and the woman in the gallery are revealed. In another scene, we see Rama speaking to her boyfriend (Thomas de Pourquery), saying, "I'm scared I'll be like her." "Like who?" he replies. "Like my mother."



In *Saint Omer*, Rama (Kayije Kagame) warily observes the trial of Laurence Coly from the courtroom gallery, perhaps recognizing something of herself in the defendant.

In elucidating *Saint Omer*'s particular position in postcolonial French cinema, it is fruitful to compare it to the work of one of Diop's acknowledged influences, Claire Denis. Denis's films based in Africa—except for *Beau Travail* (1999), whose setting in Djibouti is incidental—provide a valuable point of reference for *Saint Omer* and draw out Diop's distinctive thematic contributions. They include *Chocolat* (1988), Denis's debut feature, and *White Material* (2009) which, like *Saint Omer*, was co-written by the Goncourt Prize-winning novelist Marie NDiaye. The earlier film strikes an autobiographical note, featuring a white French woman born in Cameroon prior to its independence revisiting the country as an adult. Although critical and in some ways historically insightful, the narrative perspective—in both its extended flashbacks to the woman's childhood and the present—is rooted in the French experience of colonization and decolonization. The relative standings of the mother (country) and daughter are never destabilized. It is this precise subversion that Diop manages to execute to staggering effect in *Saint Omer*. The trial exposes the overt and genteel racism in French society, and then reverses the positions of metaphorical analysis. Here, at last, the role of the mother is questioned head on.

If *Chocolat* represents the French postcolonial positionality from which Diop strongly departs, *Saint Omer* is most redolent of Denis's later *White Material*. On its face this may pose a strange comparison, but both films fixate on individuals whose identities have been thoroughly distorted by colonialism. Laurence has made the opposite physical journey of Maria Vial, the oblivious white French coffee-plantation owner played by Isabelle Huppert in *White Material*, but that is much less significant than the almost archetypal postcolonial condition they share. They fully belong neither to the former metropole nor to the newly independent nation, both of which recoil

from such hybridity. These characters are driven to unhealthy degrees by alienation and frustrated ambitions.

If it is not already apparent, *Saint Omer* is an intellectually stimulating film, saturated with ideas and histories that are projected with refined craft. The film also raises more issues than it can possibly hope to resolve, which makes the ease of its flow remarkable. The subtle complexities are conveyed not only through the screenplay (co-written by Diop, NDiaye, and Amrita David) but also in the simple expressions and contrasts captured by the camera, especially those between Rama and Laurence. The supporting characters are largely underdeveloped and serve to propel the narrative forward and enable self-recognition between Rama and Laurence. Rama has done nothing as grisly as infanticide, but Laurence's ordeal resonates personally and intellectually. Toward the end of the film, we see Rama watching and skipping to the ending of Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Medea* (1969), and we learn that her current academic project engages this mythology.

An easy mistake in assessing *Saint Omer* would be to put undue weight on the facts of the case itself, as Anthony Lane did in his misguided review of the film in *The New Yorker*. I am unsure how Lane concluded from watching *Saint Omer* that Diop "pretty much" wants the viewer to believe that Laurence has been acquitted, unlike her real-life counterpart who was convicted and sentenced to a lengthy prison term. If there is an implied verdict, it is decidedly more complicated and unsettling. While there is no doubt that Laurence is presented primarily as a racialized victim of France, there is clearly a part of her that is French and inextricably so. If Diop has judged France to be guilty, then Laurence could hardly have been acquitted. Perhaps it is Diop's refusal to completely absolve France that has animated the mercifully few detractors of this masterwork.—**Abe Silberstein**

## Contributors

**Mitchell Abidor** is an author and translator whose latest book is a translation of Claude Anet's *Ariane, A Russian Girl* ... **Robert Cashill** is a member of the *Cineaste* editorial board ... **Mary F. Corey** teaches history at UCLA where she specializes in intellectual history and African American history ... **Will DiGravio**, an Assistant Editor at *Cineaste*, is a Brooklyn-based critic and researcher ... **Thomas Doherty**, professor of American studies at Brandeis University, is author of numerous books ... **Megan Feeney** has a PhD in American studies from the University of Minnesota and is author of *Hollywood in Havana: US Cinema and Revolutionary Nationalism in Cuba before 1959* ... **Graham Fuller** is a *Cineaste* Associate ... **Valerie Kaufman** is a freelance writer who also teaches film and writing ... **Jonathan Kirshner** is a professor in the political science department at Boston College and author of *Hollywood's Last Golden Age: Politics, Society, and the Seventies Film in America* ... **Robert Koehler** contributes writing and film criticism for *Cinema Scope*, *Variety*, *DGA Quarterly*, and *Sight and Sound* ... **Gary M. Kramer** is a film critic for *Salon*, *Gay City News*, *The San Francisco Bay Times*, and other outlets ... **Jarek Kupść** is a lecturer in cinema at the Warsaw Film School in Poland, a Polish American filmmaker, and author of *The History of Cinema for Beginners* ... **Eugene Kwon**, a doctoral candidate at Yale, is based in Tokyo and writes about East Asian cinema and media history ... **Kevin Lally** is the former executive editor of *Film Journal International* and *Boxoffice* and author of *Wilder Times: The Life of Billy Wilder* ... **Stuart Liebman** is professor emeritus at Queens College and the CUNY Graduate Center ... **Dr. Terence McSweeney** is a senior lecturer in film and television studies at Solent University and author of *Black Panther: Interrogating a Cultural Phenomenon* ... **Adrian Martin** is a film critic and audiovisual essayist living in Barcelona ... **Jonathan Murray** teaches film and visual culture at the University of Edinburgh ... **Darragh O'Donoghue** is an archivist at Tate Britain in London ... **Leonard Quart** is author or co-author of several books on film ... **Michael Sandlin** is a Houston, Texas-based writer and academic ... **Christopher Sharrett**, professor emeritus in film studies at Seton Hall University, is a Contributing Writer for *Cineaste* and a Contributing Editor for *Film International* ... **Michael Scinski** is a writer and teacher based in Houston, Texas ... **Abe Silberstein**, a writer living in Brooklyn, would like to thank Kino Klub Split and Jonathan Rosenbaum in whose workshop an earlier and shorter version of his review of *Saint Omer* was presented ... **Ryan Silberstein** is a Philadelphia-based film critic and the managing editor of *MovieJawz's* Website ... **Christopher Small** is a writer, filmmaker, and festival programmer born in the U.K. and based in the Czech Republic ... **Imogen Sara Smith** is a freelance writer and teacher and author of *In Lonely Places: Film Noir Beyond the City* ... **David Sterritt** is a *Cineaste* contributing writer and author of fifteen books on film ... **Coleman Taylor** is a recent graduate from Boston University and an aspiring critic ... **Clarence Tsui** is a Hong Kong-based film critic, part-time university lecturer, and film festival programmer ... **Harris Wheless** is a writer from North Carolina whose work has appeared in *NPR*, *McSweeney's*, *Bright Wall/Dark Room*, *Indy Week*, and elsewhere ... **Amiya Young** is a graduate student pursuing a master's in film and television studies at Boston University. ■

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.