

When Africa speaks to Europe

Film | French-Senegalese director Alain Gomis

talks to *Tobias Grey* about his prizewinning

'*Félicité*', which probes the west – via Kinshasa

The Kasai Allstars are a Congolese musical institution, but beware of talking to the Kinshasa-based band about money – even if it's only for the sake of acting. In a scene from Alain Gomis's entrancing new film *Félicité*, the band members (playing characters based loosely on themselves) gather to decide how much each of them can contribute towards an operation their singer's teenage son needs following a serious motorcycle accident.

"When we started shooting the scene, the band tried to be as conciliatory as possible," Gomis recalls. "But the longer it took to shoot, the more the true nature of their relationship with this kind of pressing economic situation came out. It became tougher and tougher for the non-professional actress who plays *Félicité* [the singer] because not many of them wanted to help her."

In the film, *Félicité* (an outstanding Véro Tshanda Beya) must come up with 1m Congolese francs (almost £500) before her son's treatment can even begin. The Kinshasa that the writer/director reveals in his fourth movie is an unforgiving place. He describes it as "a city full of deep vibrations, dense and packed in".

Gomis and I are sitting in a minimalist café not far from Paris's gritty Barbès-Rochechouart neighbourhood, where he lives. I suggest that the welfare state system in France, where the 45-year-old Gomis was born and raised, is paradisaical by comparison. Gomis shakes his dreadlocked head. "For me it's the same system in Kinshasa without all the make-up," he says. "No doubt the make-up helps a lot but in France we're also dealing with the same dominant liberal structure, which leaves the majority struggling to have a minimum of coverage.

"That's why I think the film, though it's set in Kinshasa, has something to say to Europeans as well."

This has been borne out so far. *Félicité*

won a Silver Bear at the Berlin Film Festival and the Golden Stallion for best film at the Panafrican Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso. Gomis, who co-wrote the script with Olivier Loustau and Delphine Zingg, was variously inspired by the myth of Orpheus and the Luba tradition found in southern-central DRC.

"Characters like *Félicité* can almost be seen as mythological because they're not supported by any kind of system," Gomis says. "The way they have to face up to others and face up to themselves is not unlike classical tragedy, where Greek heroes and heroines had no social security to speak of." A deep-throated laugh escapes Gomis as he acknowledges what he has just said.

The son of working-class parents (a French mother and a part-Senegalese, part-Bissau Guinean father), Gomis came to film-making in a roundabout way. After studying history of art at the Sorbonne, he took the entrance exams for France's two leading film schools, the *Fémis* and the *Ecole Louis Lumière*, failing them on four occasions. At the same time he was busy haunting the Paris Cinémathèque after a friend of his obtained a permanent free pass from a woman who was working there.

It was there that he discovered the films of some of his favourite filmmakers, such as Eisenstein, Tarkovsky, Vigo, and the Senegalese director Djibril Diop Mambéty. "I knew that I wanted to make films but I wasn't sure what kind of stories I wanted to tell," he says. This changed when he found a job teaching the rudiments of film-making to schoolchildren in the Paris suburb of Nanterre and began making short documentaries of his own about young immigrants.

Gomis got the idea for his debut feature *LA France* (2001) when he went to see one of his elder brothers, who was being held in a detention centre because he didn't have a French work permit. "I myself am of mixed race, which is a curious state to be in because you don't look

like your mother or your father's family," he says. "You feel like an immigrant wherever you are, so I think that's also had a lot to do with the kind of subjects that have interested me."

His films are full of contrasts: light and dark, waking and dreams. There is very little exposition, with the past lives of his characters hinted at but never made explicit. Most of all Gomis' cinema is alive to the senses. "I like resonances," he says. "My perception of space is sensory, like the sound of a drop of water falling in a cave. For me that is stronger than a uniquely visual perception of space."

Gomis's second feature *Andalucia* (2007) was filmed partly in Spain and his third, *Aujourd'hui* (2012), was shot entirely in Senegal's capital, Dakar, where he now has a home. It was the music of the Kasai Allstars that drew him to Kinshasa for *Félicité*, which is Senegal's entry for Best Foreign Language Film at next year's Oscars. "It's a music of traditional elements mixed in with wider musical influences such as rock and electro from countries like France," he says. "What most intrigues me, though, is the way it taps into the folkloric tradition of linking the visible and invisible worlds."

The thing that most struck Gomis when he visited Kinshasa for the first time was the omnipresence of death. "Most funerals there take place outside," he says. "If you walk through the main square, you'll see funeral wreaths for sale everywhere. I don't know of any other place where in 'moments of peace' you are so regularly reminded of death."

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In many ways it was a step into the unknown for Gomis. He was in a city he

didn't know, dependent on interpreters to communicate with actors in a foreign language (Lingala) and working with a new director of photography (Céline Bozon) who filmed everything with a handheld camera.

"The most important in all this is to remain confident," says the director, ever-conscious of feeling like an outsider. "To begin with when I'm on the set I'm quite scared. I have to steel myself when I address my cast

and crew and remind myself that I'm not an imposter."

'Félicité' is out now in the US and is released in the UK on November 10



Alain Gomis, photographed for the FT by Samuel Kirszenbaum; below, Véro Tshanda Beya in the title role in 'Félicité'

