

a Cinema Guild release



Opens June 6 in New York at BAM Film
Followed by a 35mm print tour in selected cities
2024 / 90 min / 16:9 / DCP & 35mm / Stereo / Color
English and French (with English subtitles)

Press

[Press Materials](#)

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Booking

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Synopsis

An actress and new mother (played by Zita Hanrot) is haunted by voices as she embarks on inhabiting the role of surrealist writer Suzanne Roussi-Césaire. In the sleepy palm groves of the tropics, a small group of filmmakers and actors confront the history of writer Suzanne Césaire in her youth and then stage scenes from her life, troubling the “paradise” of historical memory. Moving between narrative filmmaking and abstraction - a night at a 1940s cafe, and the garden where a film’s cast and crew discuss and bring to life the missing pieces of the writer’s legacy - this is a film that leaves room for the unknown. This is Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich’s first feature. The film stars César-award-winning actor Zita Hanrot and Motell Foster, and features a soundtrack by singer Sabine McCalla.

Credits

Cast

Zita Hanrot
Motell Gyn Foster
Josué Gutierrez
Reese Antoinette
Melisa Lopez

Crew

Cinematography: Alex Ashe
Production Design: Terry Watson
Costume Design: Mumbi O’Brien
Casting Director: Emily Rucker
Key Hairstylist: Cassandra Celestin
Key Makeup Artist: Brianna Perez
Editor: Emily Packer
Additional Editing: Nicole Otero
Composer: Sabine McCalla
Sound Design + Mix: Andrew Tracy
Music Supervisor: Cheryl Wang
Produced by: Sophie Luo, Mike S. Ryan
U.S.-Canada Distribution: Cinema Guild

Select Festivals & Awards

Winner – Best Departures Feature – IndieMemphis Film Festival
Winner – Best Film, International Competition – Belfast Film Festival
Winner – Best Film (Audience Award) – FilMadrid
Official Selection – New York Film Festival (Currents Program)
Official Selection – Toronto International Film Festival (Wavelengths Selection)
Official Selection – BFI London Film Festival (Special Presentations)
Official Selection – Viennale
Official Selection – Chicago International Film Festival
Official Selection – BlackStar Film Festival (Closing Night Feature)
Official Selection – Stockholm International Film Festival
Official Selection – Thessaloniki International Film Festival
Official Selection – REC Festival Internacional de Cinema Tarragona (Opera Prima Competition)
Official Selection – Unknown Pleasures: American Independent Film Festival (Berlin)

Official Selection – FIDMarseille (Cine+ Competition)
Official Selection – Sydney Film Festival (Flux Strand)
Official Selection – International Film Festival Rotterdam (Tiger Competition, Critics' Choice)

ABOUT SUZANNE CÉSAIRE

Suzanne Césaire was a writer, anti-colonial, and feminist activist from Martinique, who was at the forefront of the Négritude and Surrealist movements in the Caribbean during the first half of the 20th century. Césaire would also become an important Surrealist thinker, influencing the likes of painter Wifredo Lam and writer André Breton. However, despite her critical contributions to Caribbean thought and Surrealist discourse, much of her work was overlooked, and overshadowed by the largesse of her husband Aimé Césaire's five decades in French politics.

The mysteries of this influential writer who published for just four years, and never again, have been an open question of Martiniquan, French, and Caribbean history. Filmmaker Hunt-Ehrlich researched the writer for five years in the making of this film, speaking with family members, and biographers as well as reading letters and primary sources. The film is inspired in part by the imagination of Therese Svoboda whose article "Surrealists in the Tropics" brings to life the infamous encounter between the Césaires and famed Surrealist André Breton in Martinique during WWII.

DIRECTOR + WRITER

Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich is a filmmaker and artist who makes films concerned with the inner worlds of black women. Her work has been screened all over the world including at the 2023 Berlinale, the 2022 La Biennale di Venezia, the Guggenheim Museum, the Tate Modern and the Whitney Museum of Art. Her films have been awarded special jury prize for best experimental film at Blackstar Film Festival and New Orleans Film Festival. She was named on Filmmaker Magazine's 2020 "25 New Faces of Independent Cinema List" and is the recipient of a 2023 Herb Alpert Award in Film, a 2022 Creative Capital Award, a 2019 Rema Hort Mann Award, and a 2014 Princess Grace Award in film.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

Becoming a mother while reading Suzanne Césaire's archive, I kept thinking how much the fragmented excerpts found there, filled with a penetrative social and poetic look at the world, must have been constantly interrupted by the demands on her as a mother of her six children, shared with her husband Aimé Césaire. The fragment becomes a central structure of our film and an idea about how cinema can tell stories. Rather than using cinema to smooth the edges of history, here cinema drops us off the cliff where the known runs out. This ballad is a post-modern romance, a biopic that acknowledges the reasons we think about history are always informed by the things we need most in the present.

Many people made this film with me at different stages of the work—

In 2018 I spent a year traveling back and forth to Martinique and Paris, where Ina Césaire, Marc Césaire, and Marie Aimé Roussi sat for interviews to share recollections and their understanding of who Suzanne Césaire was and why she published so little. She was always writing, she threw her writing away also. What happened to such a promising voice? For me this was the central question of the film: was the choice to keep writing but not to publish a refusal, maybe a higher awareness of the impermanence of the external validation many of her intimate collaborators enjoyed? Was it a darker side effect of the entrenched patriarchy of our society? This part of the story was well articulated by writer Therese

Svoboda's article on Suzanne Césaire and André Breton's first wife Jacqueline Lamba. We licensed this article for this film, and the film is in part inspired by Svoboda's imagining of the barrier for any woman to be taken seriously by the mid-twentieth-century intellectuals known as the Surrealists.

The film was produced by Sophie Luo and Mike S. Ryan. I met Mike at the Venice Biennale Cinema College and his voice was crucial in our process. This is my third project with Sophie with whom I work creatively and collaboratively. Together, we have also worked with cinematographer Alex Ashe on several projects, including most recently the short film *Conspiracy* which I co-directed with artist Simone Leigh. It was very important to us that we shoot on film for this project. We looked at a lot of color newsreels from the fifties and sixties shot in the Caribbean in our preparation. One particular focus was around the ways aged film began to turn the lush greens of the Caribbean blue in the shadows, and the yellowing of the midtones. Production designer Terry Watson brought to the film an observation of the French Caribbean color story of muted blues, reds, greens, and white, often used together. Red and green together can be terrifying but there is a version of them in this context that speaks to a particular moment. The script was in part worked on by historian Marina Magloire, who brought many specifics from the newspapers of Fort de France during the Second World War, when the island was occupied by the Vichy military, and when Suzanne Césaire and her husband published their dissident writings on limited paper rations to distribute across the city.

Casting was very challenging because I wanted Suzanne Césaire's writing to be heard as written, and I wanted to keep the film open to as wide a Caribbean diaspora audience as possible, which is notably split by many languages while being joined by an intertwined history. We pursued Zita Hanrot for many months. I knew she was the one for this role, in no small part because she at the time was on maternity leave having just had her daughter. Even before she said yes I began to rewrite the role of the actress in the script for her: the actress would bring her new baby and nanny to the film set where she was to play Suzanne, this was her first role since becoming a mother. When Zita and I began rehearsing we began to fill out the emotional reality of this together. These sessions were deep work for us both, as we tried to hold both our own Antillean heritages as well as relationships to fledgling motherhood with the work of language, memory, and shaping text that was at times dramatic but often literary. Zita's performative athleticism in portraying emotion, and choreography was a gift to the film, which was always intended to expand on my style of intensive camera choreography and unconventional blocking. We were shooting from a limited stock of film and we needed her to get a choreography together in no more than three takes. Sometimes takes would have four or more marks, and Zita always nailed it.

The location was a challenge from the beginning. We explored filming in Martinique. Ultimately the answer came conceptually first. A friend played Sarah Maldoror's portrait of Aimé Césaire *Le Masques de Mots* for me. In the film, Maldoror follows Césaire to South Florida. There is a scene in the film that takes place in the Everglades. Maldoror establishes the space, the mangroves—which ties Florida's flat landscape to Martinique's rocky but mangrove-populated one—and then cuts to a scene where the poet Maya Angelou, seated on a lawn chair, reads Aimé Césaire in her southern American dialect. I realized this was the way into the work, as a diasporic response to Suzanne's legacy and work. We shouldn't pretend to be more than what we were: a small film outfit reading, learning about ourselves, through the things Suzanne Césaire had to say from her moment in time.

We found ourselves lucky in that we discovered a private palm tree archive in Coconut Grove, Miami where scientists go to study one of the largest collections of palm trees in the United States on 100 acres. What other knowledge was preserved here, amongst the trees whose seeds were sourced from across the entirety of the global south?

During one of my trips to Paris, I sat for some time with Daniel Maximim, an early and key champion of Suzanne Césaire's work. How will I figure out who she was? I wondered to him. It's impossible. Suzanne Césaire had been devoted to walks through the forest alone. It was something all who knew her claimed a defining trait. To figure out what to say in this film, Maximim's advice was simple: "go to the forest."