

Focus on Bande de Filles (Girlhood)

06-07-2014



A short train ride away from the centre of Paris, there is a world that is often covered by the media through a great many news items or compassionate documentaries, an area where housing estates pile up, where kids hang around at the bottom of blocks of flats and where drug deals often act as a substitute for work, given the lack of job prospects. It is a world of black faces that is rarely represented in a French film industry that is still dominated by white ones. It is a closed world with its own rules, which give a raw deal to young women, who are quickly branded as prostitutes if they so much as try to exist in a place dominated by men.

It is this tough world of ghettos in the Paris suburbs that the skilled **Céline Sciamma** has decided to bring into focus with an unusual energy in *Bandes de Filles (Girlhood)* ^[1], which opened the 46th Directors' Fortnight of the 67th Cannes Festival.

Shy Marieme (**Karidja Toure**) is 16 years old. She lives in Clos-France, together with her two younger sisters whom she takes care of, her intimidating big brother (a potentially violent referee) and her mother, who works nights as a cleaner in offices in the La Défense area. Left behind at school (she had to repeat third grade and is about to be pushed towards taking a vocational course), she makes friends with a group of three loudmouth girls who are teetering on the verge of petty crime: Lady (**Assa Sylla**), Adiatou (**Lindsay Karamoh**) and Fily (**Marietou Toure**).

From arguments to very physical brawls with other local girl gangs, and from trips into Paris (to Les Halles) for some window-shopping to evenings spent joking around with friends at the hotel, the four black girls exhibit an intense lust for life – which contrasts enormously with the way in which they have to keep a low profile (including having to avoid showing any conspicuous signs of their femininity or love life that normal teenagers would have) when faced with the male dominance that pervades all parts of the estate.

Spurred on by her desire to do whatever she wants and to find a way out of this tunnel that can only offer her a seemingly dead-end future, Marieme gradually becomes more daring, starts to behave like a "little chief" (racketeering and fighting), gets herself involved in a secret affair and, in the end, leaves her parental home, accepting the protection offered by a local drug dealer/pimp who extracts her to another neighbourhood in exchange for minor services. However, escaping her preordained destiny as a woman from the ghetto (either as a gangster's prostitute or as a married woman) is not as easy as she thinks...

Following *Water Lilies* and *Tomboy*, Céline Sciamma continues on her original, humble (always with self-limited, small budgets) and talented trajectory within French cinema. After an extremely dynamic and very successful musical opening scene, she develops her plot via sections of sequences, five parts split up by cuts to black that are several seconds long and also serve as ellipses in Marieme's journey.

The director's sensitivity and her feel for what it means to be human allow her to reproduce, in great detail and with superb simplicity, the day-to-day life and mood of Clos-France, all the while exuding moments of sheer cinematic power, based on the explosive energy of her four lead characters (there is a compelling, euphoric sequence where everyone dances to *Diamond* by Rihanna) ; yet this doesn't prevent her from shrewdly suggesting a deeper message about the France of today.

Having become an expert in the art of portraying females and young people, the filmmaker has also come up with a fine demonstration of directing on the go, clinging to her characters and favouring understated efficiency over pretentious theatricality in order to shine the brightest light possible on her actresses – four true revelations who will undoubtedly get people talking.

by Fabien Lemercier

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