

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2024/25 SEASON



AMA GLORIA
(Language: French/Kabuverdaniu)

Director: Marie Amachoukeli-Barsacq

UK Release: 2024

Running time: 83 minutes

Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 19 March 2025

“It is unlikely that this Cannes will yield many characters as strikingly well-drawn as Cléo (Louise Mauroy-Panzani), the star of Marie Amachoukeli’s small but acutely affecting Critics’ Week opener [at the Cannes Film Festival 2023 – Dorchester Film Society] *Ama Gloria*. Over the course of an efficient 84 [sic.] minutes, Cléo changes and resists change, she learns and rejects life lessons, she befriends and betrays. She is funny, somber, silly, conniving, shockingly selfish and shingly pure, sometimes all in the space of an afternoon. She is six years old.

Cléo, a bundle of personality under a tangle of hair and pair of thick glasses, lives in Paris with her affable widower Dad, Arnaud (Arnaud Rebotini), but is raised mostly by her beloved Cape Verdean nanny Gloria (Ilça Moreno Zego). Their relationship is close as a goodnight kiss, and obviously mutually adoring — witness the exchange of incandescent smiles when Cléo sees Gloria waiting at the school gates. So it’s a heavy blow to both when Gloria has to return to Cape Verde following the death of her mother. Gloria’s own daughter Fernanda (Abnara Gomes Varela) is already a young woman, and pregnant with her first child. But her son César (Fredy Gomes Tavares) is still a kid, and now needs the motherly supervision that Gloria has spent many years lavishing on Cléo.

To soothe the anguish of impending separation, Gloria proposes to Arnaud that Cléo spend the summer with her in Cape Verde. Arnaud, in the manner of many a parent, says he’ll think about it, but never really intends to permit it. Almost more than not being allowed to go, it is this white lie that provokes Cléo’s anger. In her black-and-white perception of the world, “lying to Gloria” is maybe the greatest sin a human can commit. She is so steadfast in her anger that her father eventually relents, and Cléo lights up like a lantern once more, this time as she races into Gloria’s waiting embrace at the airport gates.

It is perhaps the last time things will be this simple for Cléo. Gloria is as loving as ever and the Cape Verdean locals take to her with kindly amusement, but César is surly as a thundercloud, resentful of the girl who stole away his mother and returned her to him so long later, practically a stranger. And there are other

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demands on Gloria's attention: not just her family, but the half-built hotel she is trying to get off the ground, and even perhaps the old smolder of a long-neglected romance. There are many rite-of-passage stories out there but, perhaps because it happens so early in life, few deal so precisely with the internal Copernican revolution that occurs when innocent self-centredness gives way to the realization that other people have other things in their lives apart from you.

This is Amachoukeli's solo directing debut, having previously co-directed the Camera d'Or-winning *Party Girl* alongside Claire Burger and Samuel Theis. But aside from the detail of brief animated interludes done in a pleasant paintbrush style, that seem initially superfluous but come good in one dramatic late cut, Amachoukeli has a mature confidence in narrative and presentational simplicity, the better to linger on the seamless subtleties of Mauroy-Panzani's exceptional performance. D[eputy] P[roducer] Inès Tabarin's warm close-up camerawork leaves the girl nowhere to hide, and yet from the broadest gesture to the minutest flicker of apprehension in her magnified eyes, everything we get from her is true and honest. In one extraordinary scene when, having committed a terrible act, Cléo confesses her dark motives, she conveys confusion, guilt and sudden self-loathing with a psychological sincerity that would be startling in an actor five times her age.

Right down to the vicious tactics Cléo is willing to use to keep Gloria all to herself, there is a fairly schematic colonialism allegory available here if you want it. Like Cléo's proprietorial demands on Gloria's time and affection, European imperialist thinking was mired in a belief not just in their right to ownership of African colonies, but also in the benevolence of that relationship, which caused bewilderment and indignation — and often violence — when the colonized sought independence.

But although the film's straightforward structure certainly allows for this interpretation, Mauroy-Panzani's dazzling turn resists and complicates it: Cléo has too much dimensionality and agency to be reduced to a representation. The considerable power of *Ama Gloria* lies not in its take on colonial conscience, nor even in its insights into the complex economical and emotional dynamics of the child-nanny bond. It is in its unmatched portrait of one brave little heart, bruised but learning to beat on its own, after the painful revelation that to love someone completely is to want to set them free — even if that means freeing them from your love.”

Jessica Kiang, *Variety*, May 20 2023

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“Letting go is never easy but what happens when it’s a preschooler and a grown adult who need to part ways? It might be talked about one day along the *Ponettes* and *Koylas* of the cinematic universe, Marie Amachoukeli makes her solo debut a statement about attachment and with a remarkable screen charismatic diminutive person wrestling with big life issues who is standing tall as the focal point. With *Ama Gloria*, the Camera d’Or winner (co-directed *Party Girl*) French filmmaker presents us with a minimalist text that deciphers how we unconsciously find surrogates to fill painful voids and in the same measure explores just how much is at stake for people who are paid to be family and the life-altering implications of what that looks like for everyone involved. Employing a close-up frame, embedding painterly expression-filled tables and eliciting quite a performance from a person the littlest of actors, audiences will enter Cape Verde one way and leave with enormous life lessons learned. This is a remarkable, heartbreaker feel-good piece of cinema.

There is this curious little sequence at the onset of the film — a curly-haired little girl (Louise Mauroy-Panzani) in the optometrist being fitted with what will be a new pair of glasses and the caretaker who attempts to help her cheat when reading the letter chart. While laughable, it says so much about a support structure and trust system already in place. Clearly not her mother but a mother figure, Gloria (Ilça Moreno) had to leave her own family behind to support little Cleo. While never discussed, both understand what pain and loss look like. Gloria’s sudden need to return home swivels the relationship to a new location — let’s just say that the separation was a little too abrupt and so the father sends the six-year-old to rejoin her caretaker over the summer for one long goodbye.

Amachoukeli has a lot of possible options to detail here once the narrative moves to Cape Verde. We have two children who in their own right felt the vacuum of having a non-present mother. Gloria’s daughter is close to being an adult but is having her own child and is ill-equipped. Her younger son who quite literally at her presence is in a you can’t come here and try to fix things way too late mood. We have a future business venture available due to all her savings and a complete way of being and existing that moves in the opposite direction of the Euro life she once had. A screenplay that is generous with moments of closeness and sort of reshuffles the emotion deck, scribes Amachoukeli and Pauline Guéna (author of *The Night of the 12th*) put the focus

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on her evolution — difficulty navigating jealousy and not receiving Gloria’s attention like she once didn’t before. It’s at times a remarkable text about loving your first hero and perhaps emotional divestment from someone who can barely articulate her thoughts beyond basic needs.

Amachoukeli adds some heightened dramatic tension towards the end of the film – it’s a delicate balancing act that at once places our little heroine in troubles way but also explores different degrees to the characters — a friendly reminder that people of all ages can evolve and grow. In approximately a have dozen junctures, Amachoukeli has Pierre-Emmanuel Lyet embed some moving painterly animation – a sort of abstract that feels justifiably placed to underline the emotional currents. Cinematographer Inès Tabarin employs a natural moving camera aesthetic that sometimes singles out our heroine from the crowds – and several extreme close-ups allow us to truly get into the skin of our protagonist. *Ama Gloria* will pleasantly tug at the heartstrings – and if we could see into the future, we’d see that this separation anxiety is as comforting as a consoling, soothing embrace.”

Eric Lavallée, *Ion Cinema.com*, May 17, 2023

“By rights Louise Mauroy-Panzani should be at the front of the queue for every acting award going for her role in this gorgeous French drama. Just six years old at the time of filming (the casting director spotted her in Paris arguing with her brother in the street), she gives a performance so open and natural, it has an almost transparent quality. You feel what her character Cléo feels as her world is turned upside down over one summer. Equally brilliant is another first-time actor, Ilça Moreno Zego, a real-life nanny playing Gloria, who has taken care of Cléo since she was tiny and is now moving back to Cape Verde.

The opening scenes showing us Cléo’s life with Gloria are beautifully detailed. Cléo’s mum died when she was a baby, and she lives with her dad (Arnaud Rebotini), who is gentle but remote, still reeling from grief. It’s Gloria who is the sun in Cleo’s life. Running out of school her little face, poking out from under a tangled mop of curls, lights up at the sight of her nanny. Then, one day, Gloria gets a call. Her mother in Cape Verde has died; she is going home to look after her own children.

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Director Marie Amachoukeli-Barsacq's script gently touches on Gloria's immigration story: the hard sacrifices, but also her drive and dynamism. Working in France, she has put her kids through education and is building a hotel in Cape Verde. The story builds quietly. Cléo is to spend the summer in Cape Verde with Gloria and her two children: university student Fernanda (Abnara Gomes Varela), and a son César (Fredy Gomes Tavares) who is not much older than Cléo. He's intensely jealous of the girl who stole his mother.

Àma Gloria is a small-scale film, barely over 80 minutes, but it leaves an almighty impression. Everything is so unforced and effortlessly convincing, and there are lovely hand-painted animated sequences, smudgy like dreams or memories, that show Cléo's way of seeing the world. As for pint-sized star Mauroy-Panzani, I could watch her all day."

Cath Clarke, *The Guardian*, 12 June 2024