

52nd Sydney Film Festival

“A return from a different kind of investment”

Amma Asante, *A Way of Life* writer and director, speaks with WSWWS

Richard Phillips
13 July 2005

A Way of Life, a confronting first feature about poverty and racism in South Wales by writer-director Amma Asante, has won a series of British film awards, including a BAFTA prize for the most promising newcomer, since its release last year. Asante, a former child actress on British television, spoke with the World Socialist Web Site about the movie when she attended the recent Sydney Film Festival.

Richard Phillips: Why did you choose this subject matter?

Amma Asante: I started my career as an actor and have used writing as a bridge to directing. I'd just come off the back of writing a soap—a very surface production with 37 characters and 10 episodes, and governed entirely by the broadcaster—so I was desperate to explore character, to take my time and not have someone tell me, “more pace, more pace”.

I'm really interested in stories about the world where ordinary people, not necessarily good or bad, live—the so-called grey areas. The Leigh-Anne character, for instance, is not a child or an adult but somewhere in between, and she is a mother and someone who loves as passionately as she hates.

I also wanted to explore some serious issues. It concerns me that one third of kids growing up in the UK live in poverty and that there are parents who don't know where the next bottle of milk is coming from for their children. So the story is a tool through which to explore the poverty affecting thousands of people throughout Britain and how racism is used to deflect attention from this problem. Most of the film's characters are looking for someone or something to blame for the conditions in which they're forced to live.

A Way of Life is set in a kind of nowhere town, a place you'd probably only visit if you had relatives. These sorts of towns, of course, exist everywhere and in terms of the general plot it could take place in many different parts of the world.

RP: How long did it take to develop the script?

AA: Luckily I bumped into a drama producer at ITV Wales who was on the same wavelength and he asked me to write something along these themes. I was provided with a small amount of money and within a year three drafts had been written. The last one is what you see on the screen.

As a black female living in London, if I was going to tell a story about South Wales it had to be right. That meant lots of research and

making sure that the characters were informed by their environment and the culture in which they grew up. Everything about the film—even what appeared to be surface issues—had to have some solid grounding.

Although it was always going to be a dark and difficult story it had to come, not just from my gut feelings, but from a more solid basis. This meant looking through the case histories, and sometimes getting over my own shock about what I was reading. You think things are bad, but when you start peeling back the layers, you realise how horrendous it can be for many people.

RP: So your research shattered some preconceptions?

AA: Yes. Wales had some of the oldest black communities in Britain and the idea that there'd been people of colour in the UK for a lot longer was fascinating to me.

But I came into this wearing rose-coloured glasses and thinking that if these people had lived together with white communities for so long then things must be somehow better than in the areas where immigration was newer. I guess it was a kind of patronising view on my part. But as soon as I started to study the case histories it became clear that it was no different from the rest of the country.

My parents immigrated to the UK in the early 1960s and I grew up in London in the late 1970s and early 80s in an area called Streatham. Today Streatham is a very mixed area, but when I was young we were one of only two black families in this very long street. The National Front would have meetings at the end of my street. We had some of the typical harassment problems that black families living in white areas endured at that time.

Hasan in the story is probably how I saw my own family, or my father—a pay cheque away from total poverty and keeping his head above water simply because he has a job. Yet the film is not just about financial deprivation, but the lack of love, family structure and a collapse of hope for the future.

These kids had never known their parents, or even grandparents, to work. They're only 17 years old and have no idea of a functioning community. Mary, Leigh-Anne's neighbour, is one of the few characters who remember that the area once had a soul.

I kept asking myself as I was writing: what else can Leigh-Anne's baby be when this is the only frame of reference she has? What's her future when all she sees is poverty and degradation? Of course, I

don't have the answers—and that's not my role as a filmmaker—but it's a terrible situation.

RP: With over 30 percent poverty there must be hundreds of British towns that fit into this category. It's obviously an explosive situation.

AA: How are you supposed to contribute to the community when you're not allowed any voice whatsoever? How can you respect other people when you feel that you are not afforded any respect?

The thing that struck me was the similarity of the problems affecting young people. When the Brixton riots happened, I remember young black guys saying exactly the same stuff that the Asian boys in Bradford and white kids in Burnley said a few years later, when they rioted. It was the same fear, the same reality. So it was this similarity that interested me, not what separates people, as the media portrays it.

RP: You don't make reference to it in your film, but what about the role of the government and the tabloid media in promoting racism?

AA: What caught my eye when I began working on the script were tabloid headlines about girls leading gangs of boys in violent attacks. The press was full of stuff about mindless violence by feral kids.

I'm not saying that there isn't mindless violence, because I can't prove that there isn't, but there is a story attached to every situation and I want to know what it is.

To some extent, the murder at the beginning of *A Way of Life* is like a *Daily Mail* headline. But the difference is I'm trying to examine the deeper issues that have produced it. So the movie is a slow unravelling of how this event came to pass.

At Q & A sessions I'm often asked how I feel about Leigh-Anne and the other characters and whether I have sympathy for them. My response is: yes, of course. They're not pleasant characters but I care about them because I understand what an isolated human being feels like. On the surface you're writing about an experience that isn't yours, but underneath you're trying to write about an emotional experience that *is* yours. It's a tough thing to do.

RP: The press reports today that the Blair government is planning to use the military police this summer against drunken youth gangs. What's your comment on that?

AA: Roll on more tabloid headlines. Blair is obviously trying to impress the conservatives by attacking the sort of kids portrayed in the movie, who will just take it out on someone else. The reason youth are getting drunk or obliterating themselves is because they don't have anything to do, or are trying to numb themselves to the difficult situation they face.

RP: What were the most emotionally difficult scenes to shoot?

AA: The scene with Leigh-Anne, where she is forced to admit that she has pimped out this young girl, but says "we were cold and didn't have any electricity," was difficult to write and shoot. I've never been cold and never lived without electricity in that way. But the idea of a teenage mother who cannot wash her child in warm water because she hasn't got the money to feed the meter really got to me.

The gas and electricity companies used to cut supply if people weren't able to pay their bills. They were criticised for this, but got around it by installing coin-operated meters. Now they don't cut anyone off, you cut yourself off. And if you have a meter you pay more per unit and are penalised for being poor.

And there was the final scene where the baby is taken away from Leigh-Anne. That terrible moment, when she realises the price she is going to pay for what happened, was emotionally difficult to shoot. In fact the movie was tough all round.

RP: There's a lot of cynicism in the movie industry, with very few people interested in probing these questions. Why do you think this is the

case?

AA: Yes, and it's hard to sell this perspective. I guess it's related to the nature of the industry.

We made this film for about \$US2 million. But if it had cost another \$500,000 then I probably would have been forced into all sorts of compromises. The minute you get caught up in the business side of things and investors wanting a return on their money, then souls begin to leave characters, which is not what any serious filmmaker wants or needs.

Filmmakers are constantly confronted with the "art versus business" conundrum. My choice was to make a low budget film so these issues would not be a concern. At the end of the day, you have to live by your aesthetic choices, not the decisions of some executive. All I can say is that I'll feel blessed for the rest of my life because I was able to make this movie.

RP: And the reaction to the film?

AA: We've had an amazing response and one that I hadn't anticipated. I didn't think a movie like this would receive the attention it did. We've won 12 awards, including a BAFTA and four Welsh prizes, so there is nothing more that I could ask for. It was released in the British cinemas in November 2004 and quite often we were the number one review. For a tiny movie like ours to receive this support was tremendous, because we didn't have the marketing, billboards or television ads of a big budget film.

RP: And apart from the awards, what has been the most memorable response?

AA: I guess when people have come up to me after a Q & A and said "I live in a town or a world like this and you've got it right." It has been shown in 300 schools in the UK, where it is used for educational purposes or by community groups, and I've been asked to speak by groups who are working with kids like those in the film.

If people can use this to educate people, then it may have some impact beyond awards, audience figures or returns on investment. It's a different return on a different kind of investment.

RP: And your next project?

AA: I'm looking at the same age group but set at the end of World War II and a love story. Although it occurs in harsh circumstances it is a much more optimistic work than *A Way of Life*.



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