

Room 2806: The Accusation—Digging up the discredited sexual assault case against French politician Dominique Strauss-Kahn

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Room 2806: The Accusation, directed by Jalil Lespert, is a four-episode Netflix docuseries reprising the May 2011 scandal involving Dominique Strauss-Kahn, then the managing director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), perhaps the most powerful global financial institution, and a prospective candidate for the French presidency.

Strauss-Kahn, a leading figure in the French Socialist Party, was arrested in New York City on May 14, 2011 after Nafissatou Diallo, a Guinean immigrant and housekeeper at the exclusive Manhattan Sofitel hotel, accused him of sexual assault and attempted rape. Strauss-Kahn was subsequently forced out of his position at the IMF and did not become a candidate in 2012 for the presidential nomination of the Socialist Party, one of the two main bourgeois parties in France.

New York County District Attorney Cyrus Vance, Jr. had Strauss-Kahn removed from an airplane, subjected to the degrading “perp walk,” among other humiliations, indicted and incarcerated in Rikers Island. If convicted, the French politician faced a maximum of 74 years in prison.

From the outset, the WSWWS raised troubling questions about the case, about which little was known except for salacious snippets communicated by the media, including the *New York Times*, with “its penchant for gutter journalism.” In his class position, privilege and social outlook, we wrote, “Strauss-Kahn stands for everything the *World Socialist Web Site* opposes. But he is also a human being who is entitled to democratic rights.”

We pointed out that “Rape is an execrable crime and anyone who is found guilty of this offense must be held accountable. However, it is a fact, shameful and undeniable, that allegations of sexual misconduct have been used relentlessly, and not only in the United States, to destroy targeted individuals. The case of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange comes most immediately to mind.”

The WSWWS insisted on the presumption of innocence and other democratic principles. Prophetically, given what was to come in the #MeToo campaign in 2017 and beyond, we also noted, “Those on the political left who foolishly believe that Strauss-Kahn’s fate is a matter of indifference—or should even be welcomed as just punishment for his personal wealth and political sins—understand nothing of the importance of democratic rights.”

The Strauss-Kahn case began to unravel in late June 2011 when

prosecutors were forced to take note of the various contradictions in Diallo’s statements and the numerous falsehoods she had told them. In August, ignominiously, the district attorney’s office was obliged to request the charges against Strauss-Kahn be dropped on the grounds, in the words of its 25-page brief, that Diallo had been “persistently, and at times inexplicably, untruthful in describing matters of both great and small significance,” and the fact that the physical evidence showed no signs of violence.

Among Diallo’s “fatal” falsehoods was a claim about a gang rape by soldiers in her native country—“most significant” in this regard, explained the district attorney’s office, was “her ability to recount that fiction as fact with complete conviction.” She had also provided prosecutors three different accounts of her behavior following the alleged assault. Furthermore, Diallo had “failed to disclose a stream of cash deposits—totaling nearly \$60,000—that were made into her checking account by other individuals in four different states.” Her fiancé, in fact, had been convicted in Arizona of conspiracy to possess marijuana for sale, after paying undercover police officers \$36,500 for a large amount of the drug.

“If we do not believe her beyond a reasonable doubt, we cannot ask a jury to do so,” the prosecutors’ brief damningly pointed out.

So why, nine years later, is there a revival of the discredited and baseless case? Clearly, this has something to do with the #MeToo campaign, contemporary politics and a further shift to the right by the affluent middle class layers who promote sexual witch-hunting.

“The DSK [Dominique Strauss-Kahn], or rather the DSK cases, had an international impact and went well beyond a news item. They touch on several social issues, themes that remain relevant today. It’s a kind of #MeToo ahead of time, with testimonies from women, exceptional for the time, who are pioneers,” boasts the producer of *Room 2806: The Accusation*, Philippe Levasseur.

Relying on the presumably hazy memories of viewers about the sordid facts of the case and the current atmosphere in which race and gender are everywhere in the media, *Room 2806* is explicit in its attempt to rehabilitate Diallo. She appears on camera many times and the filmmakers do their best to portray her as a victim, a poor, black female immigrant living in the Bronx preyed upon by a powerful, white male in an up-scale Manhattan hotel.

“However, it was not written that Nafissatou Diallo would speak,” intones Levasseur. “Obviously we tried by all means to convince her of the merits of our request, but it took time.”

Whatever the case, Diallo is not the slightest bit reticent in front of the camera. On several occasions, she tearfully exclaims, “I don’t want to talk.” But she boldly pushes on: “The more I speak, the better I feel. ... I get rid of it, even if it never really goes away.”

“A very special moment that was almost improvised,” says director Lespert in an interview, describing Diallo as “someone very discreet and impressed, who rather aspires to anonymity, but felt that she needed to speak, to help others.” Allow us to remain skeptical.

The filmmaker lines up a number of female commentators, centrally Raphaëlle Bacqué, a reporter at the French daily newspaper *Le Monde*, to point out that Strauss-Kahn is an unsavory womanizer. While this is no doubt true, it is not a criminal offense. What does get buried is that Strauss-Kahn was not convicted of—nor ever charged with!—any crime in regard to Diallo.

Again, one has to remind the reader that the prosecution had no choice but to ask for the charges to be dismissed in August 2011. In its brief, the New York district attorney complained that Diallo’s “varying accounts also make it difficult to ascertain what actually occurred in the critical time frame ... and we have no confidence that the complainant would tell the truth if she were called as a witness at trial.”

In *Room 2806*, a few New York city policemen and Sofitel security guards add their unconvincing two cents in support of Diallo.

In the interests of “balance,” several of Strauss-Kahn’s right-wing colleagues from the Socialist Party, such as former Culture Minister Jack Lang and former Minister of Labor, Employment and Economic Inclusion Elisabeth Guigou, are brought in to defend him, in some cases grudgingly.

The documentary at one point returns to 2008, when Strauss-Kahn, as head of the IMF, was the target of an investigation for nepotism in the context of intimate relations with a subordinate, Piroska Nagy. Also featured prominently in the docuseries is Tristane Banon, who in July 2011, apparently prompted by the Diallo case, filed a complaint for attempted rape against Strauss-Kahn for an incident dating back to February 2003. However, *Room 2806: The Accusation* fails to mention that according to *Newsweek* magazine at the time, Banon’s mother, Anne Mansouret, who urged her daughter to pursue the issue, “is an ambitious politician in her own right who is often identified with Strauss-Kahn’s rivals in the French Socialist Party.”

One female talking head asserts that the #MeToo movement would not have existed without Diallo and Banon. Another interviewee declared that “nothing trumps more than race.”

Inserted into the series is the July 2013 case in which French prosecutors announced that Strauss-Kahn was to stand trial concerning allegations of “aggravated pimping” at the Carlton hotel in Lille. A prostitute recounts her misadventures with Strauss-Kahn, who was acquitted of the charges in June 2015.

Strauss-Kahn’s American lawyers, Ben Brafman and William Taylor, are interviewed. Omitted from the documentary is their July 24, 2011 statement, in which they declared: “Ms. Diallo is the first accuser in history to conduct a media campaign to persuade a prosecutor to pursue charges against a person from whom she

wants money. ... Her lawyers know that her claim for money suffers a fatal blow when the criminal charges are dismissed, as they must be.” They concluded, “It is time for this unseemly circus to stop.”

Robert Mooney, a former policeman and district attorney investigator, who investigated the allegations against Dominique Strauss-Kahn, is allowed a few moments. After extensively interviewing Nafissatou Diallo, he deduced that the case was “another opportunity for her to extract money from somewhere. I would say she was a con artist.”

Another flash-by figure in the mini-series is Edward Jay Epstein. The long-time investigative journalist wrote a lengthy article in the December 2011 issue of the *New York Review of Books*, shedding light on the arrest of Strauss-Kahn. He established a time-line that underscored the prosecution’s rush to indict Strauss-Kahn before the evidence could be examined and considered objectively.

Epstein hinted that those directing Diallo and orchestrating the scandal were linked to French president Nicolas Sarkozy’s administration. His revealing work is minimized in *Room 2806*.

The WSWS wrote in September 2011: “Moreover, while Strauss-Kahn is a conventional bourgeois French politician, fully committed to the defense of capitalism, his policies were not necessarily in harmony with those pursued by the Obama administration or Wall Street. His legal vindication comes more than a month after he was replaced as head of the IMF by another French politician, Christine Lagarde, more aligned with the policies of right-wing French President Sarkozy and hailed by Washington. One more time, manipulated outrage over alleged sexual misconduct has helped obscure a process through which significant changes may be made at a major institution, with a potential impact on great numbers of people.”

None of the facts or questions about the Strauss-Kahn affair trouble our present-day, gender- and race-obsessed media. A critic for *Forbes*, the business magazine aimed at the wealthy, for instance, observed recently that while “what really happened that day in the presidential suite of the Sofitel hotel” will never be known, *Room 2806: The Accusation* “shows how the justice system, and society at large, have treated a Black woman who accused a rich and powerful white man of sexually assaulting her. As the documentary shows, she was not even afforded a trial, but was outright dismissed, and discredited as unreliable.”

Jalil Lespert and the producer of the series would also like to rewrite this “fascinating case,” to “bring new testimonies” and “put the facts straight,” as “a history of liberation of the voice of women.” The viewer beware.



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