

C I N E M A

'Sugar Cane Alley' is moving

The setting is Martinique, a remnant of French colonialism in the West Indies. The time is 1931. Slavery has been abolished long ago, but nothing has changed for the poor blacks who toil in the cane fields for the rich imperialist businessmen. Freedom is a dream for the inhabitants of Black Shack Alley, and one boy is willing to fight for that dream.

Euzhan Palcy's "Sugar Cane Alley" (the French title translates to "Black Shack Alley") is the study of people caught in the economic slavery of imperialism. Through an exploration of the rural black laboring community in Martinique, writer-director Palcy offers both a critique of foreign imperialism and a celebration of life during oppression.

Jose, played with bright-eyed wonder by Garry Cadenat, is a personable, keen young boy who has the intelligence, the imagination and the drive to aspire beyond a life in the cane fields. An orphan, he is raised by Ma Tine (Darling Legitimus), his grandmother. Ma Tine also has aspirations for Jose and pushes herself to her limits so that he may receive an education and escape the economic trap.

To go beyond elementary school one must travel to the city and pay to attend a private high school. Jose, an excellent student, wins a one-quarter scholarship that is almost as good as nothing at all, but Ma Tine is determined to have him go to school. She and Jose move to Fort-de-France and she takes in washing while living in an old car crate to afford the schooling.

Simply put, Jose is a success



Photo courtesy of Orion Classics

Ma Tine (Darling Legitimus) and Jose (Garry Cadenat) discuss education over dinner in a scene from Euzhan Palcy's "Sugar Cane Alley."

story from Black Shack Alley, the only one in the film, and though his triumph is invigorating and satisfying, the conditions he left behind continue unchanged. The poor black community is tight and alive, but it is a bond of necessity. Celebration, friendship and community are the only way to escape the dreary life of poverty and field labor. Although this is not the focus of the film, it is a vital part of the story and an important part of the theme.

Palcy's film is more about people than politics, however (a simple fact of film economics: people sells, politics doesn't), and the cast of "Sugar Cane Alley" is bright and memorable. Medouza (Douta Seck) is the most important community member in the film. An old man on the verge of death, he acts as a spiritual father to Jose. The film's most beautiful and endearing scenes revolve around the two as Jose is taught the history of the blacks, the realities of economic life in Martinique and the facts

of life and nature.

"Sugar Cane Alley" doesn't take too many chances and plays down the politics to find a wider audience, but the characters come to life under Palcy's guiding hand; there are some marvelous performances. The relationships in the film are explored with feeling and intensity, and the essence of community is wonderfully recreated. Best of all, the film is remarkably accessible to today's audiences. The conditions are not all that different from those of America's Deep South after the abolition of slavery.

With the conditions in Central America and other third world countries today, "Sugar Cane Alley" is a relevant film that brings up problems that need to be recognized. With Palcy's moving treatment of the material, however, the film is put on a personal level.

The film is now playing at the Bijou. It's in French, with English subtitles.

By Sean Axmaker

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