

Amma Asante: The ‘Belle’ Interview

Writer/director Amma Asante made an unusual entry into filmmaking. As a child, she attended the Barbara Speake stage school in London, where she trained as a student in dance and drama.

She began a television career as a child actress, appearing as a regular in the popular British school drama “Grange Hill.” She fronted the ‘Just Say No’ campaign of the 1980s and was one of nine “Grange Hill” children to take it to the Reagan White House. Amma went on to gain credits in other British television series including “Desmond’s” and “Birds of a Feather,” and was a Children’s Channel presenter for a year.

In her late teens, Amma left the world of acting and made the move to screenwriting with a development deal from Chrysalis. Two series of the urban drama “Brothers and Sisters” followed which she wrote and produced for the BBC.

Amma’s made her feature film directorial debut in 2004 with A Way of Life which won her 17 international awards including The BFI London Film Festival’s inaugural Alfred Dunhill UK Film Talent Award, created to recognize the achievements of a new

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or emerging British writer/director who has shown great skill and imagination in bringing originality and verve to filmmaking. Additionally Asante collected The Times ‘Breakthrough Artist of the Year’ at the prestigious South Bank Show Awards for writing and directing the film.

At the BAFTA Film Awards in February 2005, Asante received the BAFTA Carl Foreman Award for Special Achievement by a Writer/Director in a Debut Film. On the same night, she scored a double triumph at the 2005 Miami International Film Festival, winning the award for ‘Best Dramatic Feature in World Cinema’ and the FIPRESCI (International Federation of Film Critics) prize for ‘Best Feature Film.’

Amma was born in London in 1969 and is married to Soren Kragh Pedersen, the Europol Chief of Media and Public Relations. Here, she talks about her new film, Belle, a fact-based, historical drama starring Gugu Mbatha-Raw about the daughter of an African slave and a British ship captain who was raised in England as an aristocrat.

Kam Williams: Hi Amma. I’m honored to have this opportunity.

Amma Asante: Thank you very much, Kam. It’s my pleasure.

KW: I told my readers I’d be speaking with you, so I’ll be mixing in their questions with some of my own.

AA: Okay, cool.

KW: Children’s book author Irene Smalls asks: Where did you find this story and what motivated you to turn it into a movie?

AA: Well, the story comes from the painting that emerges at the end of the film.

My producer [Damian Jones] sent me a postcard of the picture. I knew immediately that this was an unusual painting and that there was something very special about it, because I had recently been to an art exhibi-



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by Kam Williams

tion in Amsterdam that was looking at the history of people of color in art from the 14th Century. What I learned from the show, without knowing that this postcard was ever going to fall into my lap, was that people of color were generally used as accessories in paintings. We were there to express the status of the main subject of the canvas. We’d always be positioned lower than and looking up in awe at the protagonist and never looking out at the painter. But in this postcard, everything was the opposite. There was Dido Belle staring out at the painter, positioned slightly higher than Elizabeth [her white cousin] whose arm was reaching out to Dido, and thereby drawing your eyes towards Dido. So, I saw an opportunity to create a story that would be a combination of race, politics, art and history. And it went from there, with lots and lots of research.

KW: I don’t agree with the assumption of Irene’s next question. Why did you focus on the love story instead of the historical significance?

AA: I disagree with her as well. I think the historical significance was to bring the two people in the love story together. What I tried to do was to use the legal case of the Zong Massacre and the painting itself as tools to explore Dido Elizabeth Belle’s journey. They feed into her being able to find her voice and into her coming to a place where she experiences self-love. So, I would say that that’s at the center of the film, the love story between Dido and herself. Everything else kind of sits around that idea of a young woman coming into her own.

KW: Irene was also wondering whether there might be a sequel in the works.

AA: [Chuckles] No, there isn’t. I feel like this painting fell into my lap because this story needed to be told by me. I believe I was blessed to have the opportunity to be able put this story together and bring it to the screen. But I feel that my role is completed now, and I’d have to leave a sequel to someone else.

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KW: Editor/Legist Patricia Turnier says: I was very impressed that this elaborate costume drama/historical biopic was just your second feature film.

AA: Thank you, Patricia. I knew that I wanted my second film to be big and lush and important, and that I wanted it to make a statement. That’s why it took those eight years to get from my first to my second feature. I always knew I had it in me. I just had to persuade the financiers as well. I think feature films are about the confidence you have in bringing your vision to fruition.

KW: When I interviewed Gugu, she gave me the idea that you definitely had a vision of what you were trying to achieve, and also that she felt very comfortable in your hands.



Amma Asante

AA: Oh, that’s nice of her to say. It was important to me for the cast to feel safe in my hands. I was very open to collaborating with them, but they also knew that I had a very, very strong vision for this story that I wanted to tell.

KW: She goes on to say: Given that I speak French, I am curious to know where the French last name of Dido Elizabeth Belle comes from?

AA: Dido was born to a West African woman who was sold into slavery. I named the film Belle to honor both Dido and her mother, Maria. But we don’t know how she came to have the surname Belle.

KW: Patricia says: I saw the movie in Quebec in English but I hope the movie will be translated soon into French and

other languages to allow the Francophony and other cultures to discover it.

AA: Absolutely! The film has been translated ad is being released in France in a few months’ time.

KW: Patricia also asks: Why do you think that the story of Belle remained unknown, despite the painting of her?

AA: That’s a very interesting question. I’m 44 years-old now, and I grew up not knowing anything about it. But young girls and boys in England today are being taught about Dido Belle. You can read about elements of her life in various books that have been published. What there wasn’t until our film was the quintessential story that pieced together Dido’s life. Since the film does

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