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Àma Gloria (12)

Dir: Marie Amachoukeli-Barsac

With: Louise Mauroy-Panzani, Ilça Moreno Zego, Abnara Gomes Varela

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Synopsis: Cléo is six years old. She has lost her mother to cancer and is looked after by Gloria, her nanny, who loves her and whom Cléo adores. When Gloria's mother dies, she decides to return to her native island of Santiago in Cape Verde to care for own children, the teenage César and the twenty-year-old Fernanda, who is about to give birth to her own child. Gloria intends to supervise the construction of a hotel that she hopes to open for the next tourist season. Cléo is shocked, and only the promise that she manages to extract from her father cheers her up: the following summer she will be able to join Gloria in her village. Although Cléo harbours a secret hope of bringing "her" Gloria back to Paris, she comes to understand that Gloria now has her own life.

Six-year-old Cléo (Louise Mauroy-Panzani) thrusts out her small hands and grabs hold of the metal monkey bars in front of her with confidence. When she slips, her nanny, Gloria (Ilça Moreno Zego), rushes to the rescue, blowing gently on her grazed palms. Cléo knows that if she falls, she will be scooped up.

The French writer and director Marie Amachoukeli shows the grief involved in growing up in this subtle drama about the bond between a child and her caregiver. Cléo is bright, spirited and curious, qualities that have been nurtured by the attentive Gloria, who is paid for the trouble. Amachoukeli is wise to the loving force – and labour – behind this little girl's zest for life. As she depicts it, mothering is not simply instinct: it is an art.

Cléo and her widower father Arnaud (Arnaud Rebotini) live in Paris, with Gloria, who makes the decision to return to her native Cape Verde in the wake of her own mother's death. As she looks out of her bedroom window and watches Gloria disappear from view for the very last time, Cléo's world briefly crumbles.

But there is a bright spark in the near future: it is agreed that she will visit Gloria, and spend one last summer with her. In Cape Verde, she takes in black sand and towering cliffs, as well as the reality of Gloria's two children, Nanda (Abnara Gomes Varela) and César (Fredy Gomes Tavares). The older, heavily pregnant Nanda is polite but mostly indifferent to Cléo's presence, but the younger, sulkier César treats her with suspicion. "It's weird for me," Cléo tells Gloria in private, "because I only have memories of you." Amachoukeli has said that she drew on her personal memories of her Portuguese nanny when writing the film's screenplay, which honours the complexity of its central relationship. The camera



notices what Cléo does, taking in Gloria's rainbow nail polish and gold whale necklace, evocative details that feel remembered from childhood. The film adopts Cléo's point of view and so her joy, confusion and heartbreak are centred and taken seriously. The young Mauroy-Panzani is impressive as a little girl unable to hide her feelings and the thick plastic spectacles she wears only add to her vulnerability.

Delighted to be back in Gloria's arms, Cléo finds it hard to cope with the fact she doesn't have her full attention. Gloria's time is divided between Nanda, her new grandson, the man she's seeing and the hotel she's renovating, and so Cléo begins to lash out.

"That's my song!" she says, glowering as Gloria sings the new baby a lullaby and praying darkly for his downfall. While her adoration for Gloria is presented as pure, Amachoukeli is keenly aware of the way it betrays an entitlement, too.

Circumstance has forced Gloria's children to become independent in her absence. César cooks his own dinner (and Cléo's) while Gloria drives his sister to the hospital. "I don't even know her," he says about his mother to a friend.

As the family crowd around a fire pit eating grouper, it's also noteworthy that Cléo is the only white face. Amachoukeli shows rather than tells that in Gloria's country, a former colony, power works differently, that she is not simply there to serve Cléo, as the child has learned. If Cléo is naive about this, Amachoukeli is not, though she handles the racial dynamics of the film with a lightness of touch.

Tender close-ups of Gloria washing Cléo's curls and tucking her pudgy feet into bed convey genuine maternal affection. She tells a friend of hers that she raised Cléo – that she's like a daughter to her – and waving goodbye to her for the last time, Gloria releases a howl. Moreno Zego's face exquisitely articulates grief, longing, tenderness and guilt.

The film is embellished with brief, animated interludes, such as an animated volcano, pink rock whooshing turquoise lava. Hand-painted figures that appear are faceless outlines, rendered in broad, expressionist brushstrokes; like Cléo's emotions, they are colourful, intense, and unwieldy. When she touches Nanda's pregnant belly, it prompts an animated sequence that transports us to an image of Cléo as a baby, taking her first steps.

The glittering expanse of the ocean is never far from view; as with growing up, Cléo will have to eventually let go of her fear and dive in. After she first arrives in Cape Verde, she looks out at a palm tree from her bedroom window, mosquito netting obscuring the view. When Amachoukeli repeats the shot towards the end of the film, it's clear, and in vivid colour.

Credits

Cléo	Louise Mauroy-Panzani
Gloria	Ilça Moreno Zego
Fernanda	Abnara Gomes Varela
César	Fredy Gomes Tavares
Arnaud	Arnaud Rebotini
Joachim	Domingos Borges Almeida
Ophthalmologist	Marc Lafont
Teacher	Bastien Ehouzan
Fisherman	Delfi Rodrigues Dos Sanches
Investor	Manuel José Soares
Gynaecologist	Denis Ortega Acevedo
César's friend	Sidney Cardoso
Director	Marie Amachoukeli-Barsac
Screenplay	Marie Amachoukeli-Barsac Pauline Guena
Music	Fanny Martin
Cinematography	Inès Tabarin
Editing	Suzana Pedro
Casting	Christel Baras
Production	Bénédicte Couvreur

France 2023. 84 mins

Another view

It's with remarkable simplicity and tact that Marie Amachoukeli crafts her debut feature into a layered meditation on maternal love and a child's experience with grief. She lends the point of view of her film entirely to six year-old Cléo (Louise Mauroy-Panzani), a young, wide-eyed girl living in Paris with her widowed father (Arnaud Rebotini), while being raised mostly by her nanny, Gloria (Ilça Moreno Zego), in the absence of her late mother.

There's a lot here about belonging too: about class; power dynamics; and the colonial lingerings that continue to seep into the material realities of domestic labour and childcare – roles that women from the Global South have to rely on to provide for their families back home. Amachoukeli isn't too concerned with developing a stance towards these complex realities – after all, they lie well outside the comprehension of our young protagonist, but she touches upon them with nuance nonetheless. When tragedy strikes in Gloria's native Cape Verde, she must urgently return to care for the family she left behind. This news comes as a devastating shock to Cléo, whose whole world revolves around her beloved guardian.

Yet her father is quick to assuage her sorrow by promising that she can visit Gloria over the summer holidays. She embarks on the long journey, but in Cape Verde, Cléo comes to realise that she is no longer at the centre of Gloria's attention, that she has a life outside of raising her: a home; a family; a new grandchild on the way. Gloria's own children, dismissive towards their mother whose profession meant that she was away during formative years, are resentful of this young interloper, but slowly come to accept that it's not Cléo who is at fault for their mother's absence.

She is but another victim of circumstance within a system that forces mothers away from their homes for stable, reliable incomes. It is astonishing how Amachoukeli draws out such a strikingly complex, emotional and commanding performance from the young Mauroy-Panzani. We experience things through her sheltered eyes, with a (sometimes over-) reliance on tight frames and close-ups employed to lay bare how we see and feel our way through the world

as small children: full of curiosity, vulnerability and naiveté, with no grasp of a "bigger picture".

But it's not all innocence, there are dark feelings in children's complex little hearts too: jealousy, possessiveness, spite – tricky emotions that surface as a means to grapple with the pain of realising you're not at the centre of someone's universe, even if they are to yours. Moreno Zego's performance as the titular Gloria is equally layered, and the relationship between the two feels truly genuine and lived-in.

Dreamlike sequences of hand-painted stop motion animation in watery tones periodically punctuate the film, and the effect is quite beautiful. The mixed media technique cuts through the film's naturalism to bring forth something felt and ineffable, akin to the rich, vivid worlds within children's imaginations, as well as the haziness with which we recall childhood memories.

Marina Ashioti: Little White Lies

Our next screening: Friday November 8th, 7.30pm La Chimera (Italy 2023. 15)

Directed by Alice Rohrwacher (*Happy as Lazzaro*), *La Chimera* contains her hallmark sense of magical-realism as she spins a beguiling tale set in 1980s Tuscany. At the film's centre is Arthur, (Josh O'Connor) a young English archaeologist of dubious reputation who is involved in the hunt for and sale of Etruscan antiquities. The film has a wonderful sense of place, some extraordinary characters and is a story that is best enjoyed by embracing and accepting this remarkable director's vivid imagination and individuality.