

First Hollywood Style Capeverdean Fairy Tale Turns One

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Those familiar with the music of Cape Verde will immediately recognize serenata - the carefully crafted musical declarations of love, often performed impromptu, al fresco on doorsteps of those whose love is sought. The practice of course is much less popular today than it was say in the 1940s. And that is where "Serenata de Amor - a Cape Verdean Love Story Told in Song" will take you.

A period piece set in a time when racial and class divides were prominent in the archipelago, *Serenata de Amor* is the story Capeverdeans across the globe have been waiting for all along. Billed by its Executive Producer and writer Claire Andrade-Watkins, President of SPIA Media Productions Inc. (the same company behind the critically-acclaimed documentary "*Some Kind of Funny Puerto Rican*"), as the first Cape Verdean Hollywood style fairy tale, the film is a powerful story about love told through some of Cape Verde's most electrifying traditional music. Unrequited love, love lost and love found - as far as fairy tales go, *Serenata de Amor* has it all.

Having gained its independence from Portugal in 1975, Cape Verde is a relatively young country by history's standards, which means that the memory of serenata is still fresh on the minds of Capeverdeans across the globe. Much of Cape Verde's culture and history still lives exclusively in the memories of the oldest living generations spread across the globe and often storytellers rely on

personal accounts and folklore in order to share parts of Cape Verde's cultural traditions. One of the goals of SPIA Media is to change this.

"It's about reconstituting our memory, revisiting history that was erased before it was written. How do I continue to preserve the memory of generations coming afterward so that they can always be connected, because once you lose your memory and your history, you have nothing," Andrade-Watkins tells Sodade.

Over the years a number of documentaries have been made about Cape Verde, as well as feature length films and quality theatrical pieces that are performed by Capeverdeans in the archipelago on a regular basis. But a story like *Serenata de Amor*? This flawlessly looking Hollywood style production that Capeverdeans around the world can identify with? It's a first and cinematically - the film has impeccable sound quality and a meticulously detailed set - it sets high standards for productions of its kind.

To understand the large portion of Cape Verde's culture captured by *Serenata de Amor* in just under 15 minutes, we must take you back in time. After being discovered in the early 1460s, Cape Verde was populated with Europeans as well as black slaves from neighboring African countries. Capeverdeans are a result of this mixture and *Serenata de Amor* captures a thick slice of Cape Verde's culture, the discrimination against the darker-looking citizens, and uses the archipelago's most valuable cultural asset to tell the story - morna, Cape Verde's trademark melodic traditional music.

"The most cherished and sacred elements of the Capeverdean culture are language and the music, and the latter is embedded in morna. It's that tristealegria, it's fado, it's the way we show joy and we weep, it's the music for our souls. Capeverdeans, no matter what part of the world they are in, they respond to this," says Andrade-Watkins.

The images and the dialogue tell part of the story but the compositions penned by two of the greatest composers of our time, Eugénio Tavares (1867-1930) and Manuel Clarinete (1933-2006) are what make the film a *Serenata*.

"This film is the fusion of my vision as an artist, as a scholar and a filmmaker and that perspective is informed by being a second generation Capeverdean. Even though I was born in America, Capeverdeans are such a tight knit community, you really felt the tangible connection from the people who came because there was very little separation from the generations then and that shaped my formal education into wanting to tell the story."

Ah, the story! At the start of the film we meet Djedge (played by singer-songwriter Benvindo Cruz) a poor and dark peasant hopelessly in love with Laura, a light-skin woman born within a well-to-do family. Encouraged by his friends, Djedge stands outside Laura's window and declares his love in a flawless rendition of "Laura" - a morna penned by Manuel Clarinete.

"Mundo ka kre pa nu ser feliz" - the world is against our happiness - Djedge aptly sings as he opens up his heart to Laura, who peeks behind the curtains but threatened by her grandmother she is left without a chance to respond. "Laura will marry a rich man who will come from America," the grandmother informs Djedge as she chases him away from her doorsteps.

Meanwhile, Filomena (played by singer Gardénia Benrós), a peasant and a cook for Laura's family is herself hopelessly in love with Djedge who only has eyes for Laura. And thus begins the love quest. We are given a glimpse of the grandmother's own story as she cries remembering her lost love, Captain Casimiro. "Why I did I let you go," she asks the heavens.

"I wanted a story that was innocent, pure and timeless," explains Andrade-Watkins a year after the

release of the film.

Those elements certainly reign in *Serenata de Amor*. When Filomena shows up singing an irresistible rendition of Força di Cretcheu: "ka tem nada nes bida, mas grandi ki amor" - in life there is nothing greater than love - Djedge swoons. The photograph of Laura that he'd been clinging to slowly falls to the ground and his frown gently turns into a smile as he finally looks up at Filomena for the first time and, yes, falls in love.

Recorded on the Paramount sound stage at Emerson College in the city of Boston, where Andrade-Watkins is an Associate Professor of Media and Visual Arts, in a captivating custom designed set that quite literally takes viewers to Vila Nova Sintra in Brava (right down to the plants that seem to envelop the home in the film) Cape Verde, *Serenata de Amor* beautifully showcases Capeverdeans' innate love and aptitude for music and the constant need to expose their souls through song, particularly through morna. The film, directed by Benny Sato Ambush and released in May of 2013, was distributed exclusively online via YouTube, and recently was chosen as an official selection at the Athens International Film and Video Festival, Lucerne International Film Festival and Madrid International Film Festival.

But let's get back to the story. By the time Djedge and Filomena croon in unison, "Cretcheu más sabi e kel ke di meu" - the sweetest lover belongs to me - we're entranced. By the ambiance in this scene and the distinctly great voices of Benvindo Cruz and Gardénia Benrós. And just like that unrequited love transforms into love found, love that is reciprocated, but most of all, love shared to the sounds of Cape Verde's poetic and magnetic morna.

With *Serenata de Amor*, it perhaps is safe to say that amid the international programming that fills much of the television space in Cape Verde today - Brazilian soap operas, international soccer competitions and American television shows - Capeverdean media consumers across the globe may finally recognize their own hunger for more productions of this kind and come up for air to watch something completely different. Something identifiable with the rich history and culture of these Atlantic islands on a much deeper level.

Says Andrade-Watkins: "I do this for the older generations, it's part of their memory and they have entrusted me as a steward," says Watkins. "Everything that I do is rooted in empowering the community that I come from. I want to leave a sustainable legacy and that means leaving a body of work that is there beyond me."

As the first Hollywood style film (shot on a soundstage), recorded in Capeverdean Kriolu with a Capeverdean cast and Executive Producer as well as an African American Director, *Serenata de Amor* is a historic milestone in the cinematic world.

And for those who have heard stories about Cape Verde's serenata and still hope to be serenaded with Cape Verde's most beautiful morna - well, *Serenata de Amor* transforms the dream into a beautiful reality.

Photo Courtesy of Spia Media Productions, Inc.

Watch *Serenata de Amor*

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