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'Sambizanga,' New Film About Angola, Tells of Oppression and Determination

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We've had all too little word of Angola since two black groups at Harvard and Radcliffe occupied a building in April of 1972, demanding that the university sell its shares of Gulf stock—in light of Gulf's relationship with the Portuguese colonial regime in Angola. Harvard kept its stock. And the issue of independence for black Angolans hasn't gained much attention in this country.

But now a very fine film, set in 1961, brings us a slab of the recent Angolan past—and forces us to wonder if the present is any different. "Sambizanga," which opened Wednesday at the Fifth Avenue Cinema, was directed by Sarah Maldoror, who was the assistant to Gillo Pontecorvo for "The Battle of Algiers." One of her collaborators on the screenplay was her husband, Mario de Andrade, a leader in the Angolan resistance. Since the movie couldn't be made in Angola, it was filmed in the Congo. "Sambizanga" focuses on a young black couple (splendidly played by Domingus Oliveira and Elisa Andrade), who bask in each other's presence until the husband, a tractor driver, is suddenly ar-

rested as a political prisoner.

His wife, who knows nothing about his politics, walks with their baby on her back from village to village, between fields of tall grasses and huge hills, trying to locate him. Angry or desperate at moments, stoical at others, she struggles through a world that rarely explains anything to women. While she's sent from one police station to another, often repulsed or lied to, he's beaten by inquisitors who torture him in hopes of learning the names of others in the movement. He remains mute, but we almost wish that he would talk. And even his death is a relief.

The power of this picture lies in contrasts. The fact that the inquisitors are murderers as well as racists is highlighted by the calm continuity of the resistance—which includes whites as well as blacks. Despite the daily suffering, there's also a stress on friendship and affection, the ease of intimacy and some fond teasing among people who are close, plus the gaiety of dancing and music and feasting. Therefore, when we see prisoners walking slowly in a small circle inside the prison yard, we're all the more aware of the simple freedoms of those on the outside—who are at least able to stroll down a street or through a doorway.

When the prisoners delicately cleanse the bloodied face of the husband's corpse, singing to him rather as though they were trying to comfort the dead, we remember him laughing and joking with his wife. It's that range of possibilities—good or atrocious, life enhancing or death dealing—that makes "Sambizanga" a revolutionary picture. Both subtly and simply, we're shown how bad things are, how much better they could be. As Americans, we may feel helpless while we watch this film. Yet the determination for change is deeply contagious.

The movie doesn't put forth heroes or villains, and it offers a class analysis rather than a racial one. The emphasis is on the oppression of the poor by the rich—on the system that perpetuates a minority. Throughout, the plight of individuals helps to nail the political point. Meanwhile, let's hope that this impressive new director makes many sequels to her first feature film.