

American Museum of the

Moving Image

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RAOUL PECK

April 2-4, 2004

Part of the festival *Haiti on Screen*

Sunday, April 4

2:00 p.m.

FALLING BODIES (CORPS PLONGES)

1997, 96 mins. 35 mm print source: JBA Films (Paris, France).

Written and directed by Raoul Peck. Produced by Jacques Bidou. Photographed by Pascal Marti. Edited by Jacques Comets. Original Music by Mino Cinélu. Principal cast: Geno Lechner (Chase Dellal), Jean-Michel Martial (Dimitri), Bob Meyer (Ralph), Israel Horovitz (Thimothy), Dominic Gould (Bernard), Jeanne Manson (Béatrice), Joe Sheridan (Le portier), Susan Moncur (Denise Mellroy), Jerry Di Giacomo (Raymond Mellroy).

4:30 p.m.

LUMUMBA: DEATH OF A PROPHET

1991, Congo, 69 mins. Video source: California Newsreel.

Written and directed by Raoul Peck. Produced by Raoul Peck and Andreas Honegger. Edited by Raoul Peck, Ailo Auguste, Eva Schlenzag. Photographed by Matthias Kalin. Principal Cast: Patrice Lumumba (himself).

6:30 p.m.

LUMUMBA

2000, 115 mins. 35 mm print source: Zeitgeist Films.

Directed by Raoul Peck. Written by Raoul Peck, Pascal Bonitzer and Dan Edelstein. Produced by Jacques Bidou. Photographed by Bernard Lutic. Edited by Jacques Comets. Original Music by Jean-Claude Petit. Principal Cast: Eriq Ebouaney (Patrice Lumumba), Alex Descas (Joseph Mobutu), Théophile Sowié (Maurice Mpolo), Maka Kotto (Joseph Kasa Vubu).

Falling Bodies (Corps Plongés)

From a review by Leonard Klady for *Variety*, September 28, 1998:

An unusual tale of romance and intrigue, *Falling Bodies* is a love story of exiles in Manhattan that touches on personal and institutional politics. An unquestionably ambitious venture, the film is for a specialized crowd and could score niche success in several key territories. But pic's

absence of marquee players and its focus on issues that hold interest for a limited audience will make its wider commercial prospects an uphill battle.

The film is slow in revealing its true nature, dangling several false clues before settling into the drama. The central character is Chase Dellal (Geno Lechner), a Manhattan medical examiner. She's at a point where both her job and personal life are forcing her to question her options.

Several of the city's key political-influence blocs want her to soften testimony, and her relationship with a married judge (Bob Meyer) who's seeking state office is turning sour.

At that point Dimitri (Jean-Michel Martial), a deposed Haitian politician and former classmate, comes back into her life. His wife was murdered and he was ousted from his country, Dimitri's travails and resolute nature allow Chase to get a better perspective on her life.

A women's picture for the 1990s, *Falling Bodies* is a real showcase for German thesp Lechner. The script slowly strips away her icy exterior to reveal the raw emotions just below the surface. Martial is also first-rate, projecting a forceful and sexy presence. Meyer, however, is unconvincing as the third point in the triangle. The film has a nice turn from playwright Israel Horovitz as a morgue cop attuned to the woman's conflicts.

Evocatively filmed in a gritty, realistic style by filmmaker (and former Haitian culture minister) Raoul Peck, *Falling Bodies* is an engrossing, albeit sometimes erratically told, yarn for audiences unfazed by challenging fare.

Lumumba: Death of a Prophet

From the website of California Newsreel (<http://www.newsreel.org/films/lumumba.htm>):

Lumumba: Death of a Prophet offers a unique opportunity to reconsider the life and legacy of one of the legendary figures of modern African history. Like Malcolm X, Patrice Lumumba is remembered less for his lasting achievements than as an enduring symbol of the struggle for self-determination. This deeply personal reflection by acclaimed filmmaker Raoul Peck on the events of Lumumba's brief twelve month rise and fall is a moving memorial to a man described as a giant, a prophet, a devil, "a mystic of freedom," and "the Elvis Presley of African politics."

If *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet* is a film about remembering, it is even more a film about forgetting. It is not so much a conventional biography as a study of how Lumumba's legacy has been manipulated by politicians, the media and time itself. Haitian filmmaker Raoul Peck meditates on his own memories as the privileged son of an agricultural expert working for the regime which displaced Lumumba. He examines home movies, photographs, old newsreels and contemporary interviews with Belgian journalists and Lumumba's own daughter to try to piece together the tragic events and betrayals of 1960.

A film essay in the tradition of *Night and Fog* or *The Sorrow and the Pity*, *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet* explores how any image inevitably represses the multiple stories surrounding it, how the past as preserved by the media is always in a sense the hostage of history's winners. Therefore present-day Europe figures as prominently in Lumumba as the Congo in 1960, because Europe was the unseen hand behind the camera and the events leading to Lumumba's assassination. Peck presents an unfamiliar Europe seen through the eyes of a visitor from the Third World – cold, affluent, a guilty present trying to forget its past. Yet, as this film testifies, Lumumba's prophecy will not be silenced until Africa achieves its second independence where the promises of the first can be fulfilled.

Lumumba

From a review by Elvis Mitchell for *The New York Times*, June 27, 2001:

The title figure of the director Raoul Peck's whip-smart *Lumumba* is on the side of the angels, perhaps because he's an archangel, a celestial figure with a mission. Mr. Peck's engrossing, fleet biographical feature, opening today at Film Forum, shares the driven efficiency of its protagonist, Patrice Lumumba (Eriq Ebouaney), who barreled through his brief tenure as prime minister of Congo with a compulsion to accomplish. His initiative is a terrific motor for a movie, and

Lumumba's determination to do what's right, coupled with the horrific end of his life, only adds juice to the engine.

Lumumba starts in 1960 with its hero, his eyes yellowed with exhaustion and resignation, on the way to his fate. It then jumps back a few years to the beginning of his political career. The wholesale change he helped bring about, the insurrections that forced the hand of Belgium's King Leopold II, who then ruled Congo, went beyond anything he might have dreamed and feared.

The film refuses to lay out Lumumba's life in traditional, corny terms by presenting a lengthy and unwieldy history lesson and then groveling for audience sympathy. Instead *Lumumba* vaults through his radicalization and the track that led this former civil servant and beer salesman to leave his angry stamp on the world. Mr. Peck loads the picture with information, but at a breathless pace. (It presumes that those not knowledgeable about the politics can keep up with the breakneck drama and familiarize themselves with the history later.)

When the newly political Lumumba meets the young Joseph Mobutu (Alex Descas), it's a chilling moment: they're two tiger cubs who are about to change places. Lumumba has the bounce of a world-beater in his step; he's a man who can talk anyone into anything. And the opportunism he practices and is about to put behind him seems to infect the aspiring journalist and future military strongman Mobutu, whose hunger for glory will outstrip any good that Lumumba will do. The placid chill in Mr. Descas's well-fed cheeks shows his patience. In this way he is the opposite of Lumumba, his soon to be discarded friend, whose own restiveness will do him harm.

It's in moments like these that Mr. Peck's affinity for the material is most apparent. Lumumba's compulsiveness is pivotal during the handing over of Congo from Belgium to its freshly elected black officials. The new president, Joseph Kasa Vubu (Maka Kotto), is an alleviator; he gently thanks Belgium, taking his lead from paternalistic comments like, "Beware of hasty reforms, and do not replace Belgian institutions unless you are sure you can do better."

When Lumumba hears this, he is unable to contain the wolfish snarl on his face. "Our wounds are too fresh and painful for us to erase them from our memory," he brays. The embarrassed Kasa Vubu is left stone-faced and humiliated, but the rubble of hurt feelings and resentments is of little concern to Lumumba.

Certainly Lumumba's wounds are fresh. He incurred them when he was arrested for subversion and spent six months in jail before he was freed to attend a political summit in Brussels. Inside the prison where the activist Lumumba is beaten and tortured, we see the shine of pride fade from his eyes, replaced by the shock of fear and pain. It's a glimpse of coarse-grained reality, not a portrait of a noble hero who takes his lumps. Lumumba is a man who remembers indignity and wants to ensure that others will never have to suffer.

This conviction is rooted in Mr. Ebouaney's performance, which is a muscular assertion of willfulness. He can't keep his hands still, as if tapping out the to-do list in his head before time runs out; it's a beautiful realization of obsessive behavior. Mr. Ebouaney shows us the preening volatility of Lumumba, a resourceful perfectionist, and dares us to understand him.

It's a flat-out thrill to see a movie about African politics that doesn't condescend to audiences by placing a sympathetic white African at the center. Mr. Peck makes no plea for crocodile tears; his ambitions are as wide and encompassing as those of his subject. He's out to make a film that exposes the ugliness of cold war politics and knee-jerk imperialism. The movie's view is that Lumumba was sacrificed to stop African independence. His enemies used the hollow, well-meaning guise of stamping out the Communist threat. And *Lumumba* lets neither the United States nor the United Nations off the hook: it implicates both in his assassination. The irony is that Congo remains embroiled in overthrow and turmoil, the bleakest Pandora's box ever to be pried open.

Lumumba brings on new characters and revelations at a whirlwind pace; it's like the onrush of a tropical storm. It's fascinating, too, to watch a filmmaker work out his own complicated feelings about his subject, in this case a hero who was not a particularly likable human being. Mr. Peck, who wrote the screenplay with Pascal Bonitzer, understands the quicksilver mind of Lumumba.

(He also directed the acclaimed 1991 documentary *Lumumba: Death of a Prophet*, which served as a warm-up.)

This director includes scenes that could come out of an agitprop Marx Brothers comedy, like the pre-independence exchange between Lumumba and the Belgian bureaucrat Ganshof Van der Meersch (André Debaar). When Lumumba asks if it's Belgium's intention to form a government or commission a fact-finding mission, Van der Meersch sneers, "It's a fact-finding mission to form a government."

This is a movie about chaos and regret, focusing on the unleashing of forces greater than any one person could hope to handle and the carnage, however necessary, left in their wake. Mr. Peck's gambit works, and the result is a great film and a great performance.

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