

Interview: Director Daniela Thomas on ‘Vazante,’ Presented by Music Box Films of Chicago

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CHICAGO – A vital and obscure piece of Brazilian history is exposed in the new film “Vazante,” directed by Daniela Thomas, and is the latest film to be distributed by Music Box Films of Chicago. “Vazante” is now playing at the Music Box Theatre through February 8th, 2018. For more information, [click here](#). [18]

The film is a stark-but-cinematic (in black and white) treatment of a difficult subject in Brazil’s history... the trading and keeping of African slaves. In 1821, a trader named Antonio (Adriano Carvalho) comes back to his remote plantation to discover his wife has died in labor. Left with his mother-in-law and slaves to care for, he takes as his new wife 12-year-old Beatriz (Luana Nastas), the daughter of his deceased wife’s brother. As he slowly begins his trade business again, his new bride is more interested in the slave community – and a boy (Vinicius Dos Anjos as Virgilio) within it – than she is with him. The situation evolves into tragedy.



Luana Nastas and Adriano Carvalho of ‘Vazante’

Photo credit: Music Box Films

This is Daniela Thomas’s fifth feature film, and first as a solo director, and she is also known as one of the directors of the 2016 Rio Olympic Games Opening Ceremony. Her early film career was as a co-director with Walter Salles (“Motorcycle Diaries,” “On the Road”), and she also directed “Sunstroke” (2009) with Felipe Hirsch. HollywoodChicago.com sent her a series of questions on “Vazante,” and she responded via email.

HollywoodChicago.com: Why did you choose this particular time and place to tell your story? What fascinated you about bringing these characters together, considering their differences in society and race?

Daniela Thomas: Since I was very young, I have been fascinated by the life of people who lived here before me. Where do we come from? What is life like behind these old, puzzling black and white photographs we see in books? I decided to study history in college, but that wasn’t enough to appease my curiosity.

I wanted to be able to re-create that life, within the idea that we, as Brazilians, have not yet had a powerful picture of our past... that is what moved me greatly to create this film. We are a country that was built by foreigners, mostly forced to live together in dire circumstances, and this story had not yet been told.

HollywoodChicago.com: There was not much happiness to be found at this particular time in civilization. What strikes you about the will to survive rather than a pursuit of happiness?

Thomas: Brazilian history can be summed up in very short terms – the meeting of Diasporas [displaced persons], people from Portugal and our colonizers, who came to try their luck in this wild tropical country. This was combined with African natives, who were taken from their original villages to become slaves elsewhere.

There were four million slaves in Brazil, in almost 400 years of trafficking, that were captured and forced to work as slaves their whole lives. All these people lived together in inhospitable locations, and exploited the natural resources until their depletion, which was not an easy or happy life. My question in the writing of ‘Vazante’ had to do with exactly that... can love, can even true affection, survive in such a dry and violent situation?

HollywoodChicago.com: Your characters are specific and memorable looking. What was the casting process like, and was there a particular part that was difficult to get right in the casting?

Thomas: When I first talked to my producer and co-writer – Beto Amaral – about my idea for ‘Vazante,’ here is what I told him... this film can only be made if we can create a truthful picture of life in that time. And the first thing I worried about was where do we find people to transmit that alluring, mysterious presence we see in historic photographs? After extensive research, we discovered that there were ‘runaway slave societies,’ with descendants that lived in and around the area we chose to film, in the very location where the story would have taken place.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did you use those descendants in the film?

Thomas: Yes, and we also invited Africans to audition who had just arrived in Brazil from distant countries like Mali and Burkina Faso, who did not speak a word of Portuguese. The rest of the cast included Adriano Carvalho, who plays Antonio, and is an actor from Portugal. We had first-time Brazilian actors such as Luana Nastas, who plays Beatriz the child bride, and veterans like Sandra Corvelloni – who won the Palme D’Or as Best Actress at Cannes in 2008 – as her mother. The farm we filmed in was a true laboratory of the encounters that happened there two hundred years ago.

HollywoodChicago.com: Sex is used as a pawn between the characters. Since we’re currently in a conversation about sex and power in the U.S., how does carnality in your film figure in the way the power of the characters is expressed?



Director Daniela Thomas of ‘Vazante’
Photo credit: Music Box Films

Thomas: In the time the film portrays, only men experienced the pleasure of sex, for the most part. White, married women submitted to intercourse, and women slaves were forced to have sex with their masters. I am sure we are still fighting this terrible disproportion in the

experience of life.

HollywoodChicago.com: The film view the woman in this film as stronger than the men. Since this is a movie of survival, how do you think women become the symbols for the history of Brazil at this time, and moving forward?

Thomas: In my fiction, Feliciano [Jai Baptista], the mother of Virgilio and a sex slave to Antonio, gives birth to a child by that master, and that is the only surviving baby in this drama. I believe this symbolizes the birth of today’s Brazilians... the children of rape by the white man of their female slaves. Women have endured through this submission, and somehow was able to maintain their sanity throughout.

HollywoodChicago.com: You wanted a certain look for your film, and used meditative shots of the scenery and the black & white cinematography to comment on the story. What was the most difficult part of the process of working in black and white, making the right decisions on where you wanted to pause to include the scenic elements as a character in the film?

Thomas: Since my starting point were the black and white photographs of the 19th century, as I was writing ‘Vazante’ I saw the images in my head in black and white. And the setting of the film – the rocky diamond mountains of Minas Gerais – was a magnificent background with a thousand shades of gray.

I also had, of course, a cinematographer who is a true master of black and white photography, and a lover of landscape. I believe landscape to be a powerful dramatic tool in cinema. As a movie lover, I am eternally in awe of the widescreen images of John Ford, Stanley Kubrick, Michelangelo Antonioni, Akira Kurosawa and Bernardo Bertolucci, for example. The cinemascope rectangle gives one an experience of foreign horizons, to transport us to some faraway places.

HollywoodChicago.com: We are all slaves to life, in a sense. Which character do you think is most free in the film, and how do they express that freedom?

Thomas: There are two. The child bride Beatriz and Virgilio, a slave and her young companion. They dared to love, to search for happiness in the midst of violence and subjection.

HollywoodChicago.com: Which character do you see yourself most in, and what advice would you give them about life if you were to have a dinner together?

Thomas: Definitely Beatriz, I project myself in Beatriz. I wouldn’t give her any advice, instead I’d ask her, ‘how can she be so courageous?’

“Vazante” is being screened at the Music Box Theatre, 3733 North Southport in Chicago through February 8th. Featuring Adriano Carvalho and Luana Nastas, Vinicius Dos Anjos, Jai Baptista and Sandra Corvelloni. Written by Daniela Thomas and Beto Amaral. Directed by Daniela Thomas. Not Rated. [Click here](#) [19] for more information about Music Box Films.



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [21]
Writer, Editorial Coordinator
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [20]

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