

A fim by Joseph Hillel

# AYITI TOMA

The Land of the Living

A Ciné Qua Non Média production



*Ayiti Toma* is an encounter with a magical people,

a people that arose from the darkness of slavery to create the first black republic in the world. Indeed, this documentary shows that beyond the country known for its misfortunes (and its zombies!), beyond the country that has survived numerous natural disasters and even the grips of humanitarian aid, lies *Ayiti Toma*, the “country that is ours.”



Photo: Benoit Aquin

It is this less well-known *Ayiti* that we discover in this documentary, first through the testimony of Haitians themselves, including politicians, intellectuals, practitioners of vodou and young survivors from a hard-hit neighbourhood of Port-au-Prince, but also through the enlightening input of anthropologists, historians and other specialists or friends of *Ayiti*, such as the actor and hu-

manitarian aid worker Sean Penn. Their testimony rounds out a portrait that is as rich and colourful as Haitian culture itself.

In fact, all those appearing in the documentary fundamentally agree that it is this unique and vibrant culture that holds the key to the future of this country, if it is to become *Ayiti Toma*, the land of the living, the land of all possibilities.



*“Culture. Perhaps this is where Haiti’s greatest wealth lies: not in oil, but in culture. I truly believe that we have to take this into consideration going forward.”*

- Dany Laferrière

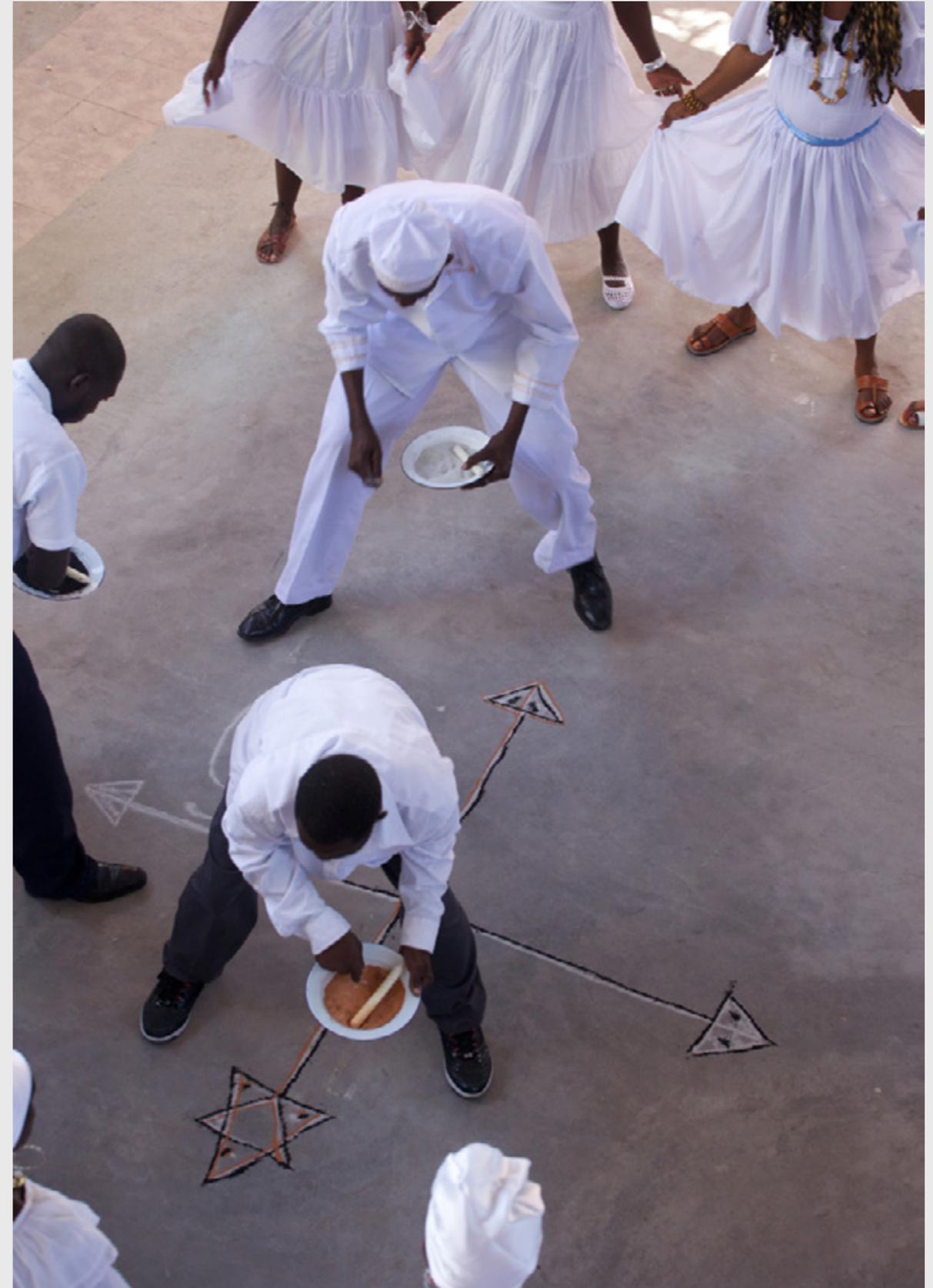


Photo: Benoit Aquin

## Je suis né à Port-au-Prince.

When I was a child, my parents didn't want us to speak Creole. They wanted my brothers and I to integrate into Quebec society. And yet, every day after school, we came home to a table laid with Creole dishes, spiced with the stories of my great-grandmother Manfine (Joséphine). To us, her stories were surrealist – a chaotic jumble of tumultuous memories, of violent and often magical tales of people forced to immigrate to Quebec in the dead of winter during the 1960s. My parents' memories of Haiti were tinged with bitterness; the arrival of Duvalier had transformed it into a different country. Also, my very Catholic family had always looked down on vodou culture, considering it folkloric and primitive, even regressive. It was all too chaotic for me to comprehend, so I chose instead to blend into Quebec society.

It was only much later – about 15 years ago – that I started to take a real interest in the country of my birth, following the death of my grandmother Mangette (Georgette). I missed her memories, her songs, her cooking, her warmth. Unlike others who had been forced to flee the country in the '60s, Mangette did not speak bitterly of Haiti. She was always proud of her origins and of her beloved homeland.



After much research (including a trip for the show *Les Francs-tireurs* in 2008), I came to understand that the Haiti my parents had known, the country where I was born, the enchanted world of Mangette, had changed. But even more importantly, I realized that despite everything I had read, seen and heard, Haiti still had a great deal to teach me – in fact, not only me, but all of us.

Since the earthquake of January 12, 2010, I've been immersed in the life and culture of my country of birth. Over the past three years, I've made about 10 trips to Haiti and spent a total of more than 25 months there, gather-

ing experiences and images. I first worked in emergency humanitarian aid with an NGO. I saw first-hand the extreme conditions in the camps for displaced people. I visited nearly every one of the country's departments. As a director or interpreter for various international media outlets and NGOs, I was able to observe how the information coming out of Haiti was treated (or mistreated!). In the course of my many meetings, interviews and observations, I came to realize that I had perhaps been misled by the mainstream media and their obsession with catastrophes. I also realized the extent to which humanitarian aid can get turned into a business.

So, rather than making yet another film focusing on the dysfunctional aspects of international aid in Haiti and on all the things going wrong in the country, I decided to take the time to look and listen, to speak Creole and to go beyond the usual clichés in search of a real understanding of Haiti and vodou. In short, I decided to experience my native country from the inside in order to offer, as much as possible, a different perspective on Haiti.

By immersing myself in my native culture, I was able to show that not all is ugliness and misery, that Haitians are not just a people tormented by a cruel history and victimized by a never-ending series of disasters. My goal was simple: to document reality in Haiti in order to present an unflinching portrait of these people we claim to want to help. Because no matter what happens, this is a country where life always goes on, a fact abundantly reflected in the country's vibrant, inviting and unifying culture, whether in the realm of music, literature, art or dance. For me, this culture feeds the hope that is always alive in Haiti, and it is this hope that is the inspiration for this film.

## Joseph Hillel

Director and Screenwriter



Photo: Joseph Hillel

Joseph Hillel wrote, produced and co-directed his first film, *Regular or Super: Views on Mies van der Rohe*, in 2004. The film won Best Canadian Film at the 22nd International Festival of Films on Art (FIFA) in Montreal, Best Photography at the Roma Art Doc Fest in 2005 and a Special Mention at the Docupolis international documentary festival in Barcelona. In 2009, his second documentary, *Karsh is History*, co-written with

Harold Crooks, also won Best Canadian Film at the 2010 FIFA.

Previously, as head of the production company Qu4tre par Quatre Films, he produced numerous short and full-feature films, including director Philippe Falardeau's *La Moitié gauche du frigo* (*The Left-Hand Side of the Fridge*), André Turpin's *Un crabe dans la tête* (*Soft Shell Man*) and Michka Saäl's documentary, *Beckett's Prisoners*.



Photo: Nicolas Cannicconi



Though we cannot see it  
Do not say it is not there.  
Though we cannot hear it  
Do not say it is not there.

Ancestors, where they are living, cannot be seen.

The vodouns who protect us cannot be seen.

Our progeny waiting to be born cannot be seen.

Spirits within rocks and rivers cannot be seen.

Yet do not say they are not there.

What we see of the universe is a small leaf

Floating in a pond whose edges are beyond our  
vision.

Excerpt from *The Bordeaux Narrative*

by Harold Courlander



Photo: Joseph Hillel

## WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF



### Lody Auguste

*Minister Responsible for Human Rights and the Fight against Extreme Poverty*

A community health worker, militant and dedicated social activist, Lody Auguste studied nursing and social work. She has a Master's in Health Administration and has completed the coursework toward a Ph.D. in Applied Human Sciences.



### Laënnec Hurbon

*Sociologist*

Laënnec Hurbon has a Ph.D. in theology and sociology (Sorbonne) and is a research director at the CNRS (National Centre for Scientific Research) in Paris. Hurbon is an expert in Caribbean religion, culture and politics, and is the author of several books on Haitian vodou, including *Le Barbare imaginaire*.



### Sean Penn

*Founder and CEO of J/P HRO*

Two-time Academy Award® winner and celebrated American director Sean Penn founded the J/P Haitian Relief Organization in January 2010. The organization focuses on providing medical aid, engineering, and relocation services.



### Papa Danis

*Houngan (vodou priest)*

"The rituals within vodou are not necessarily all the same. Everyone has their own way of singing, just as everyone has their own way of banging the drum."



## Madala Désir

*Mambo (vodou priestess)*

“Without us, Haiti cannot be rebuilt. The Haiti of tomorrow will rise thanks to the vodouists, thanks to our spirits.”



## Laurent Dubois

*Professor of History at Duke University*

A specialist in Caribbean revolutions and modern citizenship, Laurent Dubois is the author of several works, including *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History* and *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*.



## Konpè Filo

*Journalist*

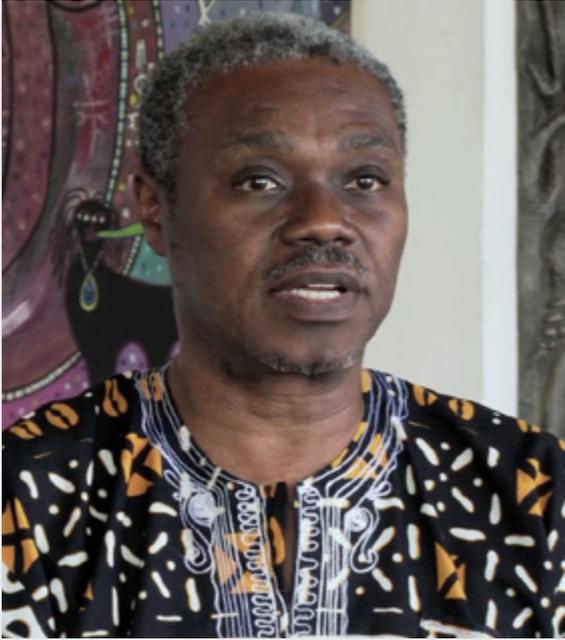
One of Haiti’s most popular journalists, Konpé Filo was arrested, tortured and exiled by the Duvalier regime. He lived in numerous countries until being able to return home after the fall of the dictatorship in 1986. Today he hosts a widely watched daily TV show on Radio Tele Ginen Haiti. He is a well-known advocate of vodou culture.



## Timothy Schwartz

*Anthropologist*

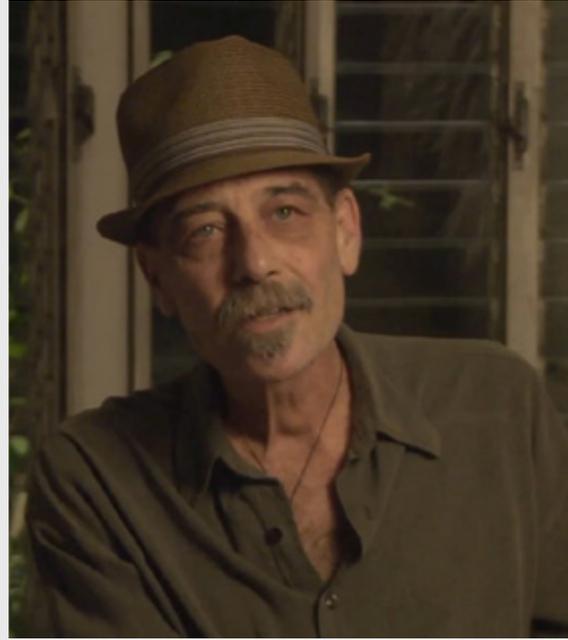
Timothy Schwartz, Ph.D., is an expert on Haiti and a critic of the NGO sector. A graduate of the University of Florida, he spent a decade doing doctoral research in the most poverty-stricken areas of Haiti, following by work with NGOs dedicated to food aid. He is the author of several books on Haiti, including *Travesty in Haiti*, an account of the failures of foreign aid in Haiti.



## Camille Chalmers

*Professor of Economics*

Since 1995, Camille Chalmers has served as director of PAPDA (Plateforme Haïtienne de Plaidoyer pour un Développement Alternatif), a coalition of Haitian organizations working to develop alternative solutions for the development of Haiti and denouncing neoliberal policies.



## Ira Lowenthal

*Anthropologist and Ethnologist*

An expert on Haiti for over 40 years, Ira Lowenthal has worked in many sectors of humanitarian aid in Haiti, including USAID, the Inter-American Development Bank and several NGOs. He is also an important collector of Haitian art. "Our problem is not *Goudougoudou* (the earthquake). We were already sick. All *Goudougoudou* did was expose our problem."



## Residents of the Fort-National neighbourhood

"There are some people in Haiti who demonize the hougans. They even claim that they are werewolves. While some may not understand vodou, as soon as a Haitian hears the beat of the drum, he may seem indifferent, but he is affected nonetheless. It's our umbilical cord."



Photo: Nicolas Canniccion

## Michel Ouellette

Producer

After studying literature and theatre at university, Michel Ouellette helped produce multimedia shows before launching his film career in 1982. Since then, he has produced over 30 short and medium-length features, approximately 40 documentaries and cultural films for television and five features for theatrical release. He also

produced the feature-length film *The Favourite Game*, adapted from the Leonard Cohen novel.

Michel Ouellette has worked on several film co-productions with France, Spain, England, Indonesia, Germany and Finland, as well as partnerships with the United States, Mexico and Japan.



Photo: Nicolas Canniccioni



Photo: Benoit Aquin

**SHOOTING FORMAT:** HD  
**SCREENING FORMAT:** DCP  
**RUNTIME:** 81 min 25 s  
**GENRE:** Documentary  
**ORIGINAL VERSION:** French, English and Creole  
**SUBTITLES:** French  
**RATIO:** 16/9  
**SOUND:** Dolby SRD  
**COUNTRY OF PRODUCTION:** Canada  
**YEAR:** 2013

**A FILM BY JOSEPH HILLEL**  
**PRODUCER:** Michel Ouellette  
**ASSOCIATE PRODUCER:** Joseph Hillel  
**CINEMATOGRAPHY:** Nicolas Canniccioni, Benoit Aquin  
**EDITING:** Heidi Haines, Arto Paragamian  
**SOUND:** Joseph Hillel, Étienne Côté-Palluck, Guy-Marie Jean-Louis  
**SOUND MIXER:** Jean Paul Vialard  
**MUSIC:** Jowee Omicil  
**POSTER:** Graphic design by Karine Savard and photograph by Joseph Hillel

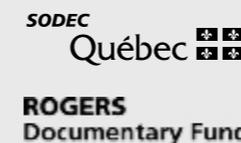
**PRODUCTION:**  
**CINÉ QUA NON MÉDIA INC.**  
55, Mont-Royal Ouest, bur. 801  
Montréal (Qc) H2T 2S6  
T +1 514 271-4000  
info@cqnmedia.com

**DISTRIBUTION IN CANADA:**  
**FUNFILM DISTRIBUTION INC.**  
5146, boul. Saint-Laurent, bur.2  
Montréal (Qc) H2T 1R8  
T +1 514 272-4956 F +1 514 272-9841  
funfilm@cinemaginaire.com  
funfilm.ca

**MONTREAL MEDIA:**  
**IXION COMMUNICATIONS**  
Judith Dubeau and Henry Welsh  
190A, ave. De L'Épée  
Montréal (Qc) H2V 3T2  
CANADA  
T +1 514 495-8176  
judith.dubeau@ixioncommunications.com

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