

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Peeling Back the Layers of Black Indie Film



William Greaves, right, filming “Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One.” William Greaves Productions.



By **A.O. Scott**

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To watch Kathleen Collins’s “Losing Ground” — a 1982 film making its long-awaited theatrical debut at Lincoln Center on Friday as part of “Tell It Like It Is,” a sprawling survey of black independent film of New York from 1968 to 1986 — is to experience a curious blend of nostalgia and novelty. The clothes the characters wear, how they talk and what they talk about, the grainy texture of the images and the weariness of the world they capture — all of these emerge from a time capsule devoted to an era that doesn’t quite have a name. But partly because those images have remained unseen for so long, and partly because Ms. Collins, who died in 1988, was such a bold and idiosyncratic filmmaker, “Losing Ground” also feels like news, like a bulletin from a vital and as-yet-unexplored dimension of reality.

A story of emotional distress and creative striving among the black intelligentsia, with the wobbly marriage of a painter and a philosophy professor at its center, the film casts a highly individual spell. Driven as much by mood and setting as by plot, it follows the main couple, Sara (Seret Scott) and Victor (Bill Gunn), from the busyness of New York to the pastoral calm of the town upstate where they take a house for the summer. Victor is enchanted by the natural beauty and the local beauties, one of whom becomes his model and muse. Sara, meanwhile, agrees to appear in a student film alongside a charismatic actor (Duane Jones) whose deep voice and enigmatic utterances fascinate her.

But within the frame of domestic drama — or marital comedy, as the emotional temperature tends to fluctuate — Ms. Collins, who was a scholar and playwright as well as a filmmaker, roams and ruminates amid a thousand thoughts, themes and pictures. Sara, whose research focuses on the religious and aesthetic dimensions of “ecstatic experience,” is surrounded by artists, which is both an inspiration and a nuisance. They seem to have direct access to the ecstasy she can only study and theorize. She is a thinker who craves the immediacy and intensity of feeling that comes easily to her husband, and also to her mother, an imposing actress more in tune with Victor than with her daughter. At the same time, Sara grows more and more impatient with the flakiness and self-absorption that are apparently universal aspects of the artistic temperament.

“Losing Ground” enacts its own version of this tension. It is highly cerebral, thick with abstract and erudite dialogue and also full of charm and sensuality, lingering in landscapes and rooms and savoring the pleasures of music, color and talk. It’s as restlessly critical as Sara and also as relaxed and funny as Victor, even as it chronicles the erosion of the common ground between them.

By itself, this movie is fascinating — a puzzle and a marvel, eliciting wonder and provoking questions. Where did it come from? Luckily, “Tell It Like It Is: Black Independents in New York, 1968-1986” provides an answer. It’s an ambitious, revelatory series devoted to an astonishingly rich, dismayingly underappreciated chapter in American movie history.

The program includes Ms. Collins’s first film, “The Cruz Brothers and Ms. Malloy,” about three young Puerto Rican men in the semi-suburban wilderness of Rockland County, N.Y., and several movies involving Mr. Gunn, a brilliant and protean actor, writer, director and theater artist. “Ganja and Hess,” his 1973 experimental vampire caper — starring Mr. Jones as an aristocratic anthropologist who develops an appetite for blood after being stabbed with a ritual dagger — is among the better-known titles on display, though the rare chance to see it on a big screen is a pretty big event.

Contemplating it alongside “Losing Ground” is especially satisfying, and not only because you get to spend more time in the dazzling company of Mr. Gunn and Mr. Jones, who should have been movie stars. (Both were in their early 50s when they died, Mr. Jones in 1988, Mr. Gunn a year later. Mr. Jones is probably most famous for his lead role in George Romero’s 1968 indie-horror classic “Night of the Living Dead.”) “Ganja and Hess” blends genre sensationalism with experimental daring in a way that anticipates Ms. Collins’s unorthodox mixing of narrative and avant-garde techniques. Taken together, they look less like dazzling curiosities than like part of a movement, a tendency, a scene and a moment.

“Tell It Like It Is” surveys the complexity and diversity of that moment, finding landmarks and buried treasure. The starting point might be William Greaves’s “Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One” which has in the past decade journeyed from almost complete obscurity into a rightful place in the canon. It is one of the great New York films, one of the great experimental films, one of the great ’60s films, one of the great black films — just one of the great films, period, largely because it remains so fresh, so radical and so hard to assimilate more than 45 years after it was made.

A making-of documentary about a making-of documentary about a film-within-a-film, it’s an infinitely recursive meditation on the relationship between cinema and reality. It’s also a summer excursion into Central Park, where Mr. Greaves leads an earnest, mostly white crew and cast through rehearsals, test shots and open-ended meetings on what exactly they’re up to.

The results are displayed in split-screen compositions and interspersed with postproduction sessions during which members of Mr. Greaves’s team, in the absence of their leader, try to figure out what to do about the movie they are making, and about a director who seems to be losing control of the project and losing touch with reality.

There’s a lot of meta going on there, but “Symbiopsychotaxiplasm” feels less like a self-conscious postmodern exercise than a blast of honesty. It reflects its era’s preoccupation, at once playful and earnest, with finding authenticity in an alienated, media-saturated world. Delighted with the artifices of filmmaking, Mr. Greaves is also after the truth — about human interactions, about cinematic image-making, and also, slyly and unmistakably, about race.

“Tell It Like It Is”: The name evokes a great R&B song (most famously recorded by Aaron Neville), and also an African-American-themed public-affairs broadcast that ran on New York television from 1968 to 2011. And the program’s great achievement is in giving attention to the many different ways “it” — black life, New York, the art of film — was in the years between Mr. Greaves’s great adventure and the arrival of Spike Lee and a new generation of black independents.

Mr. Lee’s thesis film at New York University, the documentary “Joe’s Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads,” will have a screening, as will his breakthrough feature, “She’s Gotta Have It” — a sign of continuity and influence. What links Mr. Lee’s early films to those of his predecessors is the desire to explore the details of African-American life without cant or sentimentality. Filmmakers like Ms. Collins and Mr. Gunn — and films like “Losing Ground,” “Ganja and Hess” and Mr. Gunn’s “Personal Problems,” a collaboration with the novelist Ishmael Reed — have their political and social concerns, but these are expressed above all through an insistence on claiming all the freedoms of art.

The documentary impulse was strong through the 1970s and early ’80s, and is represented by a wealth of material, short- and feature-length, some of it made for television. Standouts include “I Am Somebody,” Madeline Anderson’s powerful account of a 1969 hospital workers strike in Charleston, S.C.; Camille Billops and James Hatch’s “Suzanne Suzanne,” a wrenching portrait of a woman confronting drug addiction and a legacy of abuse; and “In Motion: Amiri Baraka,” St. Clair Bourne’s affectionate, unvarnished midcareer snapshot of that poet and activist in his quarrelsome prime. (The series includes mini-retrospectives of Ms. Anderson’s and Mr. Bourne’s work.)

Mr. Baraka, who migrated from Greenwich Village to Harlem (and then to Newark), and from ecumenical avant-gardism to Black Nationalism (and then to Marxism), is an important figure in the creative and ideological universe mapped by “Tell It Like It Is.” James Baldwin, the subject of Dick Fontaine’s “I Heard It Through the Grapevine,” is another. The challenges of racial politics in the years after the civil rights movement are a recurrent theme, as is the desire to forge a coherent cultural identity in a crisis-ridden, rapidly changing city.

New York was a different city then, and one of the bittersweet pleasures of sampling these films is to note what has changed — the sharp edges that have been blunted, the rough beauty that has been lost, the improvisational spirit that has been tamed and institutionalized. But valuable as it is as a history lesson, “Tell It Like It Is” is something much more. Take another look at that title: It’s an imperative.

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