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Novo, Nouvelle, Not Nyet

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XICA. Directed by Carlos Diegues. Written by Diegues and João Felício dos Santos. Produced by Jarbas Barbosa. Released by Unifilm/Embrafilme. At the Cinema Studio 1.

L'ADOLESCENTE. Directed by Jeanne Moreau. Written by Moreau and Henriette Jelinek. Produced by Philippe Dussart. Released by Landmark Films. At the Baronet.

SIBIRIADE. Directed by Andrei Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky. Written by Konchalovsky and Valentin Yezhov. Produced by Mosfilm. Released by International Film Exchange. At the Embassy 72nd Street.

One of the key films of the Brazilian post-cinema novo, Carlos Diegues's 1976 *Xica* was a box-office smash that provoked considerable critical debate. Like Nelson Pereira dos Santos's 1977 *The Tent of Miracles*, Diegues presents a New World nexus of race, sex, and colonial exploitation in a boisterous carnival atmosphere. Set in the mid-18th century and based on a historical incident, the film details the rise and fall of Xica da Silva, a black slave who briefly gained considerable social power in the diamond-rich province of Minas Gerais.

Xica's capital is her body, and she doesn't need Merrill Lynch to tell her how to invest it. More than a complacent sex toy, she's a slave who learns to rule her masters. There's a demonic aspect to her (never shown) erotic specialty; as addictive as morphine, Xica literally makes her lovers scream. When João Fernandes, the new diamond contractor, arrives from Lisbon, Xica wastes no time bringing her charms to his attention, disrupting a business meeting with melodramatic aplomb. The smitten Fernandes compels Xica's reluctant master to sell her—she's soon queen-ing it over the contractor's household and has little difficulty persuading him to set her free.

The fantasy of liberation provides Diegues with his richest material, and it's a measure of that fantasy's complexity that Xica's wish-fulfillment is founded largely upon narcissism and underscored with the desire for revenge. In the film's most stylized sequences, Xica parades around her palace like a glam-rock star (blonde wig, blue lipstick, glitter-encrusted eyes), surrounded by a bevy of capering handmaidens. Although already a creature of legend, she's not immune to humiliation. The local priest refuses to allow her into his church, so she has Fernandes build her a pleasure boat from which she bans all whites (except for her servants). Her slaves disport themselves on board while the scandalized bourgeoisie fumes on the river bank.

Of course, the foundation of Xica's world is less secure than she supposes. Mining diamonds bigger than his fist while indulging his mistress's outrageous whims, Fernandes becomes an inadvertent threat to the Portuguese crown (as well as local

mores), and Lisbon ultimately sends an inspector to rein him in. Xica gallantly seduces this unpleasant fop with a spectacular "African feast" of food and sex, but the next morning he arrests Fernandes anyway. Immediately, Xica's power evaporates: the locals burn her boat and run her out of town. Xica may have briefly turned the world upside down, but as Diegues points out in his notes on the film, "Liberation is collective."

Xica has more substance than either of

FILM



Race, sex, and carnival: *Xica*'s Carlos Diegues with star Zezé Motta

Diegues's subsequent movies, *Summer Showers* and *Bye Bye Brazil*, but it's as schematic as the former while lacking the latter's lush local color and easy myth-making. Part of *Xica*'s awkwardness derives from Diegues's reluctance ever to understate his intentions. The film begins with an itinerant musician deceitfully telling the camera that "artists shouldn't meddle in politics" and ends with a disheveled young revolutionary—the son of Xica's first master—waxing grandiloquent over her symbolic meaning. (Delightfully, she takes this as the opening gambit in his lovemaking.)

The paradox is that *Xica*'s greatest asset ends up being something of a liability. Zezé Motta, the actress who plays the title role, is no conventional beauty—lithe and angular, she's a Josephine Baker imp with an abrasive streak of vindictive haughtiness. It's a vivid performance that ultimately renders the surrounding characterizations all the more flat and perfunctory. Motta is truly something; but after a while you feel like you're watching an extended version of the bit in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* where a horny

adolescent plays a love scene with a cardboard cutout of Debbie Harry.