

## VARIETY

By DAVID STRATTON

Updated: 2/23/01

More current reviews...Paris-based Algerian filmmaker Rachid Bouchareb's latest film reverses the idea of "Roots" and follows the fortunes of a 65-year-old Senegalese from his African home to Harlem, where he manages to track down distant relatives descended, as he is, from Senegalese slaves transported to America in the early 19th century. With considerable help from the eloquently gentle presence of Sotigui Kouyate as the man determined to locate his American cousins, Bouchareb's rather too diffuse film holds the interest for most of its length, and certainly should be a fest favorite in the coming months. There's a reasonable chance, too, of limited North American distribution because of the always timely theme, with strong ancillary prospects to follow.

Opening and closing scenes unfold on the Senegalese island of Goree, which was one of the centers of the slave trade. Alloune (Kouyate), a widower, acts as a guide at the Slavery Museum, but his obsession with tracking down family members, no matter how distant, soon takes him to the U.S. and to the plantations of South Carolina where, despite the very sketchy records available, he manages to find clues indicating that members of his family were re-named Robinson by their masters.

He then travels to New York, where his good-natured nephew, Hassan (Karim Koussein Traore) works as a cab driver and lives in cramped conditions with his girlfriend, Biram (Adja Diarra). They manage to make room for the old man, and before long he meets Ida Robinson (Sharon Hope), who he is certain is descended from his own family.

Ida, a widow who runs a small store in Harlem, is a quick-tempered woman about the same age as Alloune. Without telling her they may be distantly related, he persuades her to give him a job.

Though the film is cluttered with too many marginal characters, it has the distinct advantage of its keen, analytical outsider's view of African-American society. This includes not only the very seductive widescreen photography, but details such as the thinly disguised racism many black Americans display toward their African cousins.

The first part of the film, depicting Alloune's journey from Africa to Harlem by way of the still gracious plantations of the South, is the more interesting; the second half, which includes some fairly standard incidents of gangland melodrama, works mainly because of the radically different vision through which these familiar events are observed.

Evocative soundtrack, including songs by the Golden Gate Quartet, complements the lush imagery in this intelligent and intriguing look at some

quintessentially American themes and problems.

Benign central performance of Kouyate, whose halting English is sometimes hard to decipher, is abetted by a strong contribution from Hope.