

Theresa Traore Dahlberg

When Theresa Traore Dahlberg realized that she couldn't relate to narratives about women in West African films, she decided to make her own.

Theresa Traore Dahlberg is currently editing her first feature-length documentary, *Du Courage*, a bildungsroman shot in Burkina Faso. Her whole life, Theresa has split her time between the Sahelian nation and Sweden. It's an arrangement she says has broadened her perspective and instilled a versatility at her core—a valuable set of attributes for a documentary filmmaker. Knee-deep in more than 170 hours of footage, Theresa discusses her drive to persist, challenge stereotypes and deliver the West Africa she loves to a bigger screen and audience.

What are your working days currently like? I'm finishing my first feature documentary that was filmed in an all-girls school for car mechanics in Burkina Faso. It's a film about making choices, friendship, lost mothers and pretty much the everyday life of a teenage girl—a coming-of-age story in Ouagadougou. I'm also in my last year of studying fine arts at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm where I'm working on painting, sculpture and installation projects.

How do you decide what to document in your films? It completely depends on the project I'm working on. I decided that I wanted to do my last film, *Taxi Sister*, after

being in film school and having not seen even one inspiring film from the continent of Africa. Every time I saw an African film at school, I walked out feeling half as tall. The subjects were always war, poverty and disease. Of course, these stories should be told but if that's the only thing that you see then there's no balance. I felt like inspiring stories of women in West Africa were lacking. I also wanted to see more everyday stories that I could relate to. In general, what makes me want to document something is when I'm moved by a person or a place or if I'm passionate about a particular subject. It always starts with an initial gut feeling.

You spent a lot of time in West Africa yourself as a girl. I grew up in between Ouagadougou and the island of Öland in the southeastern part of Sweden. It's actually called the "Swedish savannah." I grew up there and I also grew up in Burkina Faso—back and forth.

How do you think that's shaped you? First of all, it gave me language. I've always spoken French, Swedish and English. It definitely gave me a wider perspective and also flexibility—the ability to adapt and pretty much feel at home in a new place. It was very important for my parents that we

played with kids from different backgrounds from a young age. For me, the understanding that people are the same wherever you go has always been in my core.

Where else have you had to adapt? After high school, I lived in Barcelona for a little bit and came back to Sweden to study economics. It turned out to be completely wrong for me, so I took my savings and went to New York and started assisting different directors and photographers among other jobs.

When did you realize that economics wasn't the right path? When I moved to New York, I lived in a small apartment with other girls my age that had aspirations and ambitions within the arts and music. I realized that it was okay to try and work for your dream, even if it's outside of a normal everyday job. We encouraged each other a lot and are still good friends today. I started assisting directors, and after a few years I studied experimental film and 16mm film at The New School before applying to Swedish film school.

Why film? For me, filmmaking is a way of communicating, understanding and seeing. I feel very present when I'm filming, like I'm 100 percent there. I also like the whole process of filming and

Right: Theresa wears a coat by Acne Studios.

Photograph: Bee Wilson, Styling: Martin Persson

