

movie magic in mozambique

by ron hallis

To Mozambican villagers, films are a rare and wondrous experience. For Ron Hallis, film-making in Mozambique is no less fascinating.



Ron Hallis getting the perfect tot shot. Hang in there, kid!

On June 25, 1975, Mozambique became an independent republic after five-hundred years of Portuguese colonial domination. The Marxist-Leninist government of **FRELIMO** (Front for the Liberation of Mozambique) established the Instituto Nacional de Cinema to help "unify, mobilize, and educate the people." The Portuguese filmmakers who worked in Mozambique before Independence, grinding out effulgent trash such as *The Visit of the Governor of Rhodesia to Mozambique*, had little interest in developing African cinema, or allowing the young Mozambican workers they employed, and exploited, a chance to learn the whole process of filmmaking. The few Mozambicans chosen to work as assistants to the Portuguese, were sequestered in tedious jobs, refused access to higher knowledge, and even forbidden to enter each other's work-space. In the country as a whole, the Mozambican people were not allowed to express themselves politically or culturally, travel from one region to another, or develop a meaningful perspective on the outside world.

The Ministry of Information has recruited 'Cooperantes' from Great Britain, Brazil, and Canada to teach filmmaking at the National Film Institute in Maputo. Ophera and Ron Hallis spent a year and a half as Cooperantes teaching film and making films in Mozambique during 1978 and '79.



I often sat at the window of our apartment in Maputo before leaving for work in the morning, watching the sun rise over the Indian Ocean and the first rays of orange light striking the tops of Coconut palms along Avenida Friedrich Engels below. A stormy, Canadian winter night three years earlier sometimes came to mind. I had just then purchased a processing machine, printer, and sensitometer from Joseph Gonda, a teacher of photo-chemistry at Sanford Fleming College in Peterborough, and was hauling it home to Montreal in a rented van. As I stared through the windshield at the icy highway, I thought of Robert Flaherty hand-processing the negative and workprint of *Nanook* in the extreme conditions of the Sub-Arctic, using ice water to wash the developed film, and mounting his contact-printer over a hole cut in his cabin wall where the sun acted as an exposure lamp.

My idea had been to set up a small, functional, 16mm laboratory which would enable me to continue making low-budget, black-and-white documentaries with the highest possible image quality. During the next three years I was to develop a strong attachment to the mess of tanks, pumps, pipes, and rollers that brought the plastic material through the most hazardous, final stages of film production. Crouched in my cellar for countless hours, listening to the compressed-air squeegee blowing fa fa fa along the perforated edge of miles and miles of film, I learned the ropes by trial and error, some scientific analysis, prying information from reluctant lab managers, and meeting obscure machinists in taverns after work to discuss, among

Ron Hallis is a teacher on contract with the National Film Institute of Mozambique. He is presently working on three documentaries, shot in Mozambique, on communal village life there.

other things, recirculation, carbon-lung blowers, and self-priming pumps. I began to entertain the idea of taking in outside work to finance my own productions when Robert Lantos of RSL Productions approached me to process the negative of Gilles Carle's film *L'ange et la femme*. Carle, his cinematographer François Protat and I, did several tests of exposure, developers and development, to ensure optimum quality. The film was shot in 16mm and blown up to 35mm for theatrical release.

Glen Hodgins, a young Canadian sound-recordist I had met, had been to Mozambique and was aware of their need for someone to teach motion picture laboratory technique. He took my application with him on his return. It included details of the work I had done on Carle's film. A Mozambican delegation was to see Carle's film out of competition at the Cannes Film Festival and, impressed with the quality, contacted me up on their return to Maputo. Several weeks later I was on a plane, studying Portuguese grammar and vocabulary, trying to imagine what awaited me at 946 Agostinho Neto Avenue.

I was put up at the Hotel Aviz on the corner of Patrice Lumumba and Salvador Allende, a twenty-minute walk from the white stucco building housing the Cinema Nacional and Instituto Nacional de Cinema. At that time, about ten people were working in the production department, and three short films were in production: *Offensiva Culturale*, a sixty-second 'spot' for a Worker's cultural festival; *Cheias*, a ten-minute documentary about the 1977 floods in the Limpopo River Valley; and *Chimoio*, a ten-minute documentary about the Rhodesian attack on a

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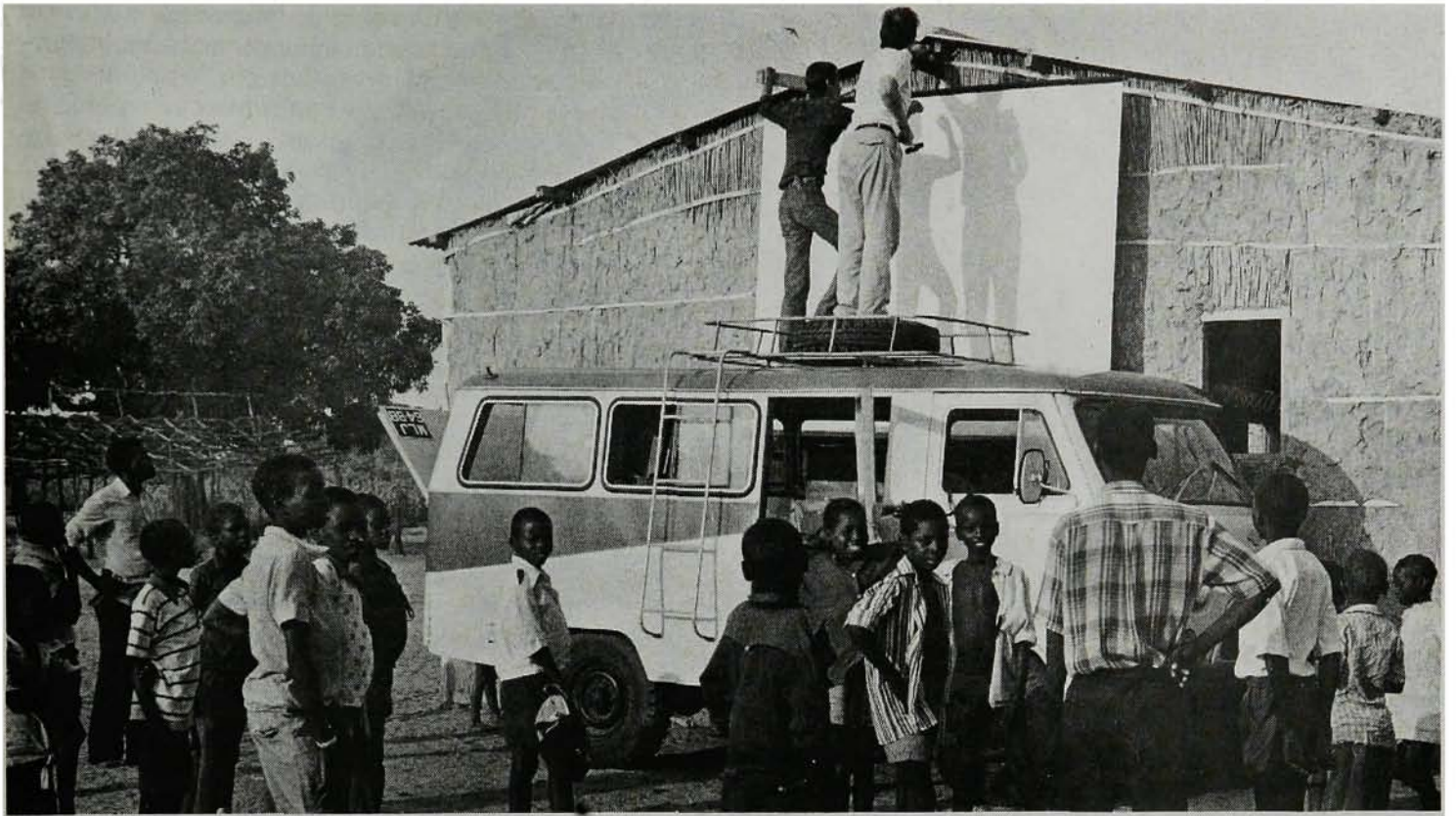
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Zimbabwean refugee camp near the Mozambican town of Chimoio. Sitting amongst the lab workers, Malo, Malumba, Castigo, Vasco and Magaia, I watched the horrifying images of countless bodies of murdered women and children strewn over the rain-soaked ground and piled in huge open graves.

Most of the year and a half that Ophera and I spent in Mozambique was devoted to work at the Institute. Our collective was comprised of editing, camera, and laboratory workers, plus a group of foreign Cooperantes including Murillo Salles, a Brazilian director of photography (**Dona Flor**); Brazilian director Ruy Guerra (**Os Fuzis, The Sweet Hunters**); Canadian soundman Glen Hodgins; editor Ophera Hallis, and myself. Together, we were responsible for the production of a series of eight monthly documentaries called "Kuxa Kanema" (meaning the 'birth of cinema' in Changana, the local language), and two feature films — **Estas Sao As Armas**, a compilatory documentary about the struggle against Portuguese colonialism and Rhodesian aggressions; and **Mueda**, a film on the annual street-theatre dramatization of the 1960 massacre of six-hundred Mozambicans by Portuguese troops in the town of Mueda.

Towards the end of my stay in Mozambique, I began researching a film project that I planned to shoot in my spare time, about a Makuayi dance group I had encountered one afternoon dancing under the awning of a sidewalk cafe in Maputo. The leader of the group, dressed in white cotton pants and jacket decorated with Portuguese military insignia, FRELIMO colors, and an MPLA button, wore white gloves and a Traffic Control Maputo arm-band. He was chanting gutturally into a disconnected telephone receiver as he stamped and shuffled back and forth before an appreciative audience. I asked a man standing next to me what the song meant. "He is telephoning Salazar," he answered, "telling him he will never again touch this earth." I was fascinated by this type of dance and the intense, personal style of the leader, who I subsequently came to know quite well: Antonio Matusse, son of Maningi and Mahombu from Xai-Xai (pronounced Shy-Shy) had left the countryside to work in a South African gold mine, and then returned to serve in the Portuguese colonial army. After we had known each other for a few weeks, he invited me to travel with him to the Communal Village Omm, near Xai Xai, to visit his mother, father, and brother. He wrote to his brother and told him that we were coming with the cinema 'muchini' (derived from the English word, machine). During the long bus ride Matusse told me a compelling story about the first time he had seen a film. When he was about sixteen, a Swiss couple had come to his area offering to show an educational film to the people. Matusse's father suggested that they show the film that night in front of his house, and went about notifying the people in the area. During the projection, two jeeps full of armed, Portuguese police arrived, rudely dispersed the crowd, and arrested the Swiss couple and Matusse's father. Two hours later at police headquarters in Xai-Xai, the Swiss couple was released after a stern reprimand, and Matusse's father was jailed for thirty days in a cell one meter high, one meter wide, and two meters long.



An excited audience surrounds the mobile cinema truck from the National Film Institute while Ron Hallis and Camarada Caldeira hang the screen on the cantina wall



Dancer Antonio Matusse "telephoning Salazar" in Maputo

photo : Ophera Hallis

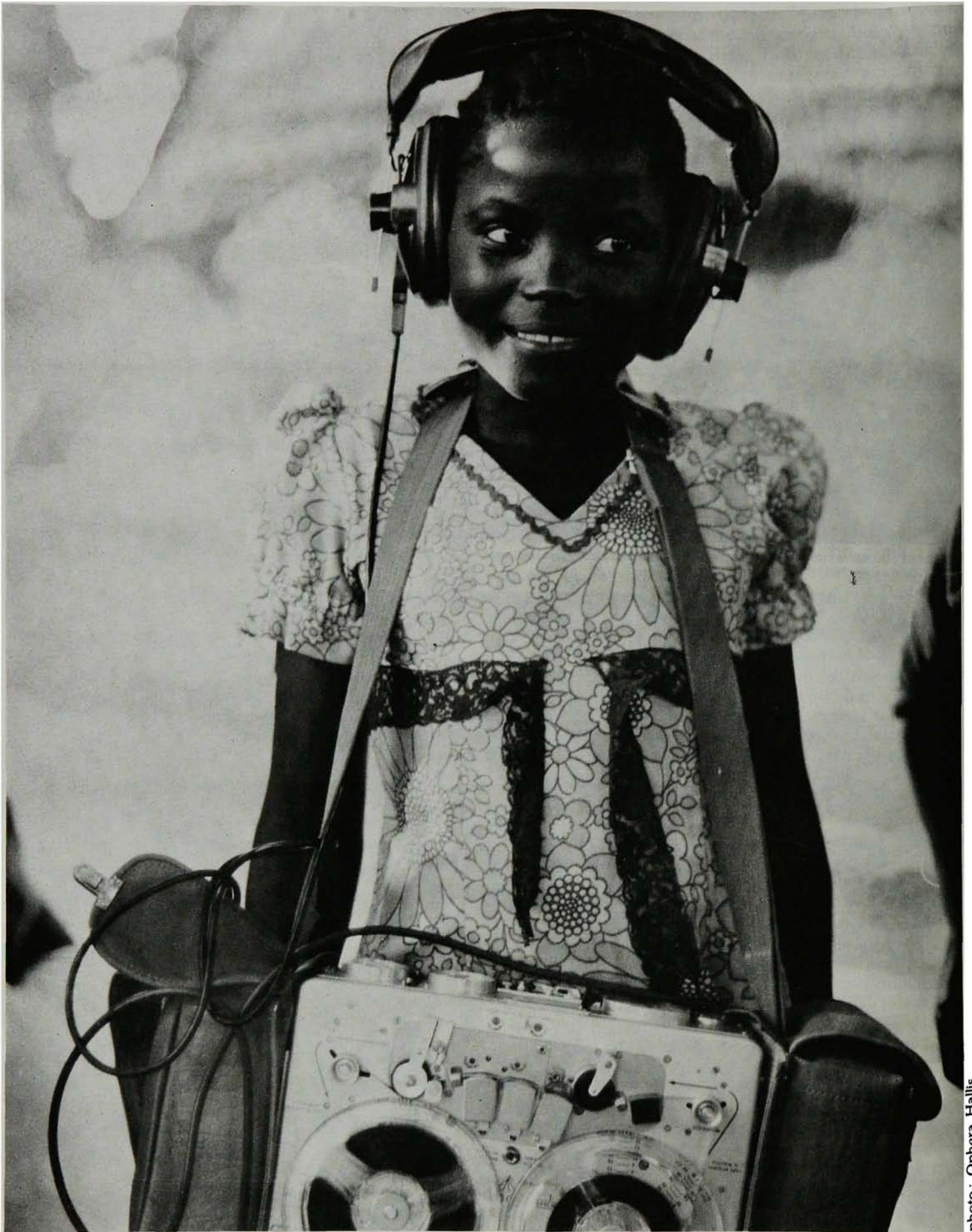


photo : Ophera Hallis

Anastasia likes the sound of her own voice; hearing it on tape for the first time

22/February 1980

When we arrived near the Communal Village Omm and unloaded our equipment cases from the bus out onto the high banks of plowed sand, a group of about twenty children were waiting and began dancing around the cases singing "Cinema! Cinema!" A beautiful young woman heaved my Arriflex case onto her head and we all started off down the path between fields of dried corn stalks and banana trees. More people came to meet us part way and the equipment changed heads.

Finally, we were taken to the assembly place near the cantina and introduced to the village "Responsavel," Eugenio Duvane. Drums were being set up and more villagers were arriving every minute. About fifty children were singing a lovely song. "Hiyieni va camarada, hiyieni yaka ma aldeia. Na aldeia kuni shikolwe, na aldeia kuni a crechi, na aldeia kuni hinkwasu, hiyieni yaka ma aldeia." ("Let us go comrades, let us build communal villages. In the communal villages we have schools, in the communal villages we have day-care centers, in the communal villages we have everything. Let us go comrades, let us build communal villages.") The dancing and singing went on into the darkness as the swarming mosquitoes of November, up from the Limpopo River, began asserting themselves nastily. Someone handed me a piece of white cloth about two feet square to flick about my ears and over my shoulder to drive them away. An oil lamp was lit and put on the table before us casting a warm glow on the unspeakably beautiful faces of the many children curiously observing us. As they were very amused at my awkward use of the cloth, I decided to use it in a way I knew better. I held one end in my teeth and the other at arm's length, and with my free hand projected shadow puppets on the improvised screen. I heard several excited voices say "Cinema! Cinema!" as if this display was a preparation for something they had heard about but never seen. I learned later that the people had been expecting to see a film that night. In his letter, Matusse had failed to explain what kind of film 'muchini' we were bringing. Some explaining had to be done.

Although well-received by the children of the village, and vouched for by Matusse, we were not above suspicion in the eyes of the wise and cautious Eugenio Duvane — understandably, as there had been several reported cases of sabotage in rural areas. Strange visitors would come to a village asking for lodging, then disappear during the night leaving a wake of destruction. Usually the cantina would be burned, and with it, the meager food supplies, and other goods.

When we arrived in the village Duvane arranged for our equipment to be locked in the cantina. After the singing and dancing, we were taken to a small house with concrete walls and a thatched roof where we were to spend the night. For some time Duvane sat with us, talking, asking questions, sometimes probing for a reaction... Aware of his lingering doubts despite the friendly conversation, I remembered that the Institute had given me an official document to carry us through the military check-points along the road to Xai-Xai. Duvane poured over the letter, and I sensed his relief as he folded it carefully and handed it back to me with a smile. Then, I tried to explain my filmic intentions to him. The spirit of the village was beginning to



photo : Ron Hallis

Ophera Hallis, Camarada Ameline, and Camarada Duvano in the Limpopo Valley with sugar cane and an Arriflex in hand

transform my vision of Mozambique. Until then, I had only seen the urban reality with its many contradictions and lingering vestiges of Portuguese colonialism. Duvane told us the story of the founding of the village in the aftermath of the devastating floods of 1977, footage of which I had seen at the Institute months before. It saddened me to think that my time in the village was so limited, that I would be leaving within twenty-hours. (Little did I know that we would return and spend weeks working on two other films



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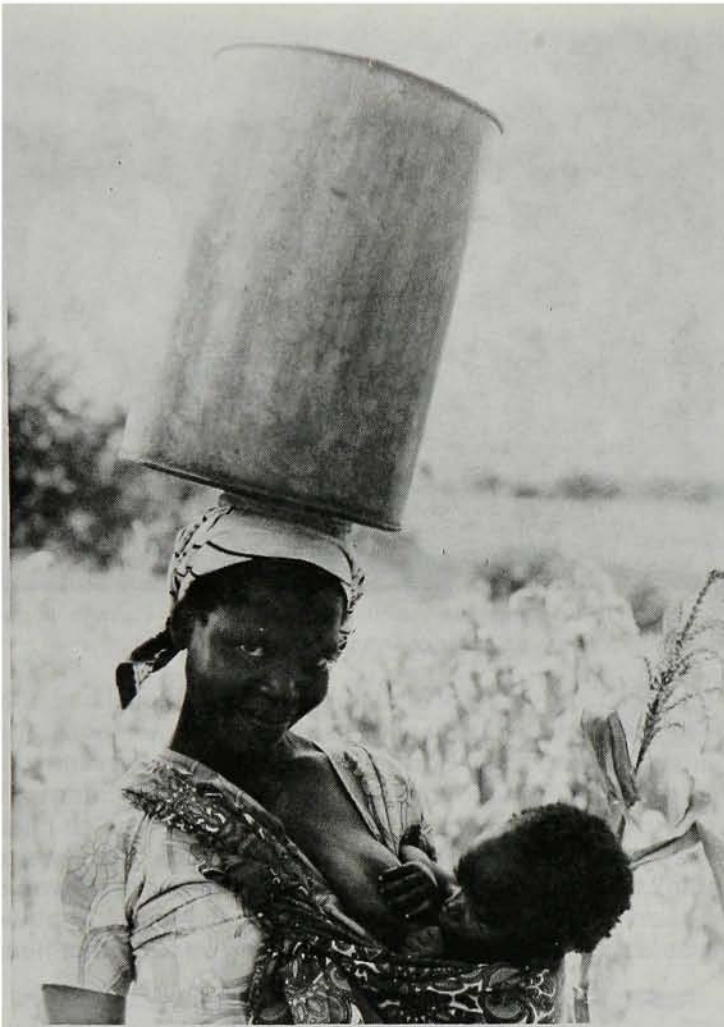


photo : Ophera Hallis

The "spirit of the village" contrasted to the urban life transformed Ron Hallis' vision of Mozambique

in which Duvane's participation would be significant.) The next day we filmed the Sundy 'Cultura,' a weekly 'Festa' in the village meeting place, consisting of songs, poetry, and dancing. Matusse put on an extraordinary display of his dancing talents, with his brother and father beside him. He carried a sign welcoming himself to the village along with some cryptic biographical information. When it was time for us to leave and walk the five kilometers to the highway bus-stop, Duvane gave a speech to the people explaining what we had been doing with the camera and recorder. "People!" he said. "I have a few things to say and it will not be my fault if you don't listen. Everything we have done here today has been seen and recorded by these machines" (pointing to the camera and tape recorder). "Tomorrow these people will be back at our Institute in Maputo, and three months from now they will return to show us what we did here today: how we walked, how we spoke, how we sang, how we danced. All of this and more will be shown to us with other machines. This is all I have to say. It is all true. They will return to show us everything we have done today. Thank you all."

On a starry, moonless night three months later we returned, and projected the film to five thousand people — almost the entire population of the village. The response was electrifying. They wanted to see the film again and again. When the projector lamp faded for the last time and

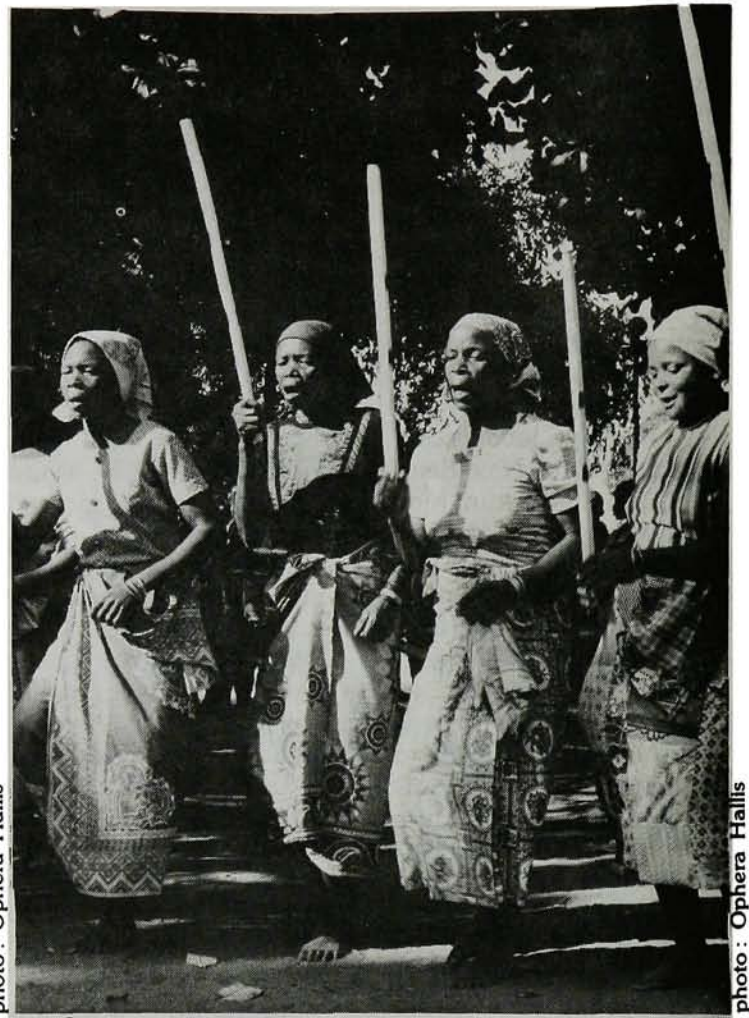


photo : Ophera Hallis

The Mutimba dancers in the Communal Village Omm : one of many village scenes that inspired Ron Hallis to make a film on Mozambican dance

the generator sputtered to a halt the sky took over, and I saw a shooting star streak across the horizon. I stared upward, exhilarated by the screening, the night sky, and the knowledge that we would be staying behind when the mobile cinema truck left the village that night and headed back to Maputo. Then I saw another point of light, moving slowly across the sky. I knew it to be a satellite — weather, communication — reflecting the rays of the sun that would soon be rising over eastern Canada. A young worker from the Institute, standing beside me, saw it too. "Another Rhodesian war plane," he said sadly. "I've seen them many times."

We stayed on for seventeen days living in a small hut with mud-covered reed walls and a corrugated tin roof, sleeping under a mosquito net suspended from three chairs and a table. They were among the happiest days we spent in Mozambique; rising before dawn, walking long distances through the village reaches and down to the Limpopo, filming, recording, translating with Duvane at night in the hut... So much laughter, understanding, learning, and thankfulness for the revolution that brought us together. On the day before leaving, as is the tradition, we planted three manioc roots in the Creche garden. "One for Camarada Ophera," Duvane said, "one for Camarada Ron... and the other for your first child. These plants will be fully grown by the time you return." □

We are proud to have played an important part in these films and series.

Meatballs	Virus
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Wild Horse Hank	Never Trust an Honest Thief
Circle of Two	Silence of the North
Tanya's Island	The First Hello
Nothing Personal	Silent Partner
Phobia	Fast Company
The Last Chase	Fortune and Men's Eyes
I Maureen	The Last Detail
Starship Invasions	Tom Sawyer
Ragtime Summer	Class of '44
Love at First Sight	The Fox
White Dawn	Find the Lady
One Night Stand	Second Wind
Equus	Tom and Jo-Anne
3-Card Monte	Black Christmas
Black Pearl	Full Circle
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