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A Lesson from Philadelphia's Little Film Festival that Could

One of many rare images in Dagmar Schultz's "Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years 1984 to 1992" Photo: Dagmar Schultz

by [Akiba Solomon](#)

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<http://colorlines.com/gender-matters/>

For a four-day event that began as a small assortment of screenings, there were plenty of major moments at Philadelphia's inaugural [BlackStar Film Festival](http://blackstarfest.org/) last week. Curated in less than a year by producer and filmmaker [Maori Karmael Holmes](http://karmalux.com/home/), this new celebration of film by and about people of the African diaspora featured more than 40 works from four continents including the Philadelphia premiere of Byron Hurt's [Kickstarter-assisted](http://colorlines.com/archives/2011/11/new_documentary_soul_food_junkies_needs_your_support.html) [Soul Food Junkies](http://colorlines.com/archives/2011/11/new_documentary_soul_food_junkies_needs_your_support.html); the U.S. debut of Berlin filmmaker Oliver Hardt's [The United States of Hoodoo](http://hoodoo.stokedfilm.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=84&Itemid=218), a sold-out screening of Nelson George's *Brooklyn Boheme*, and a candid talk about African American filmmaking outside of the Hollywood system by [Sundance-prize winning](http://colorlines.com/archives/2012/07/sundance_winner_middle_of_nowhere_trailer.html?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter) [middle of nowhere](http://colorlines.com/archives/2012/07/sundance_winner_middle_of_nowhere_trailer.html?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter) director and [organizer](http://www.affrm.com/) Ava DuVernay.

"As far as my friends and I knew there was no black film festival in the city. I just wanted to screen films here that I'd heard of in other cities and hadn't gotten a chance to see. Somewhere along the line it became a festival," says Karmael, also founding artistic director of the woman-centered [Black Lily Film & Music Festival](http://blacklily.com/?pageid=6) and the associate director of the

[Leeway Foundation \[http://www.leeway.org/about-us/who-we-are/staff/maori.html\]](http://www.leeway.org/about-us/who-we-are/staff/maori.html). “I realized I wasn’t interested in ‘Black Hollywood.’ I wanted to use the platform to bring attention to films that might never make it to a theater, cable or online streaming channels.”

Karmael and her mostly female team of volunteers chose the name BlackStar as a pean to self determination. “It emanated from Marcus Garvey’s Black Star Shipping Line as a symbol for Black economic independence, and [Ghanaian prime minister*] Kwame Nkrumah’s use of the black star as a symbol for African independent nationhood,” says Karmael, a self-described feminist and post-Black Arts baby. “All of the associated lyrics from the Yasiin Bey/Talib Kweli Black Star project started playing in my head and then name just seemed perfect.”

While the biggest crowds filled Philadelphia’s [International House \[http://ihousephilly.org/\]](http://ihousephilly.org/) for screenings of nationally publicized works such as [Brooklyn Boheme \[http://bkboheme.com/\]](http://bkboheme.com/) and *Soul Food Junkies*, lesser known films also attracted audiences. For me, the highlight was a German import, [Audre Lorde: The Berlin Years 1984 to 1992 \[http://www.audrelorde-theberlinyears.com/presskit.html\]](http://www.audrelorde-theberlinyears.com/presskit.html).

Written, directed and produced by German feminist publisher and professor [Dagmar Schultz \[http://www.audrelorde-theberlinyears.com/bios.html\]](http://www.audrelorde-theberlinyears.com/bios.html), the documentary provides an intimate portrait of the poet, professor, activist and cultural organizer who died of cancer in 1992 at age 58. Through never-released video, photographs and (sometimes hilarious) interviews with Lorde, her partner, Gloria Joseph, and a tight-knit group of Afro-German activists and writers, *The Berlin Years* tells the story of Lorde the genius facilitator.

When Harlem-born Lorde arrived in Berlin in 1984 as a visiting professor, she immediately sought out Afro-Germans—who were then known only by pejoratives like “cross-breed,” “mulatto” and “brown babies”—and taught them how to see themselves outside of what she observed as “the pain of living a difference that has no name.”

The anecdotes are rich. For instance, at the end of a 1984 poetry reading, Lorde asked the white women to leave the room and the black women to remain until they had spoken to at least one other black woman. “Her intention was to make us feel: No matter what you do, you are not alone,” recalls one Afro-German activist who was in that room. “You must work together! Make yourself visible and raise your voice, each of you in her own way.”

Lorde’s seemingly simple act inspired an anti-racism movement tightly bound with feminism. Her gentle prodding, joke-cracking, party-throwing and speechmaking became the connective tissue between Afro-Germans who went on to found collectives such as ADEFRA (Afrogerman Women and Black Women in Germany) and the ISD (Initiative of Black People in Germany) and to produce anthologies, memoirs and poetry collections.

The Berlin Years also shows Lorde the social agitator. In a room full of visibly uncomfortable young white women, she explains, “Racism in Germany, in Switzerland, in Europe must become an issue for white

feminists because it is part of your lives, it affects your lives in every way, and the fact that you are not people of color does not make you safe from the effects of it.” In another scene, a young black German man asks her if black women’s liberation struggles are a drain on “the overall movement.” Without sarcasm or condescension, she breaks down the basics of intersectionality.

The message of the Lorde film mirrors that of the BlackStar Film Festival, which Holmes says will return to Philadelphia next summer: To create change, folks need to gather in the same space, talk to one another and celebrate what we share. I’m looking forward to the alliances, the ideas and the *work* conceived and nurtured by this little festival that could.

*An earlier version identified Kwame Nkrumah as a Ghanaian president. He was a prime minister.

Read this online at http://colorlines.com/archives/2012/08/for_a_four-day_event_that.html

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