

53rd Sydney Film Festival--Part 3

Some films about South America: a disappointing collection

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This is the third part of a series of articles on the 2006 Sydney Film Festival, held June 9-25. The first part was posted July 17, the second part July 19.

The Sydney Film Festival this year screened several movies dealing with aspects of life in South America. Not all of these were made in South America or by its filmmakers—some were joint international efforts or made exclusively by European filmmakers.

The four films considered in this review examine a range of important social issues—from the plight of youth in the slums of Brazil, to violence and poverty in Venezuela, and a dramatic portrait of the last years of the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. Most of them, however, were disappointing. Some were limited by the filmmakers' inability or unwillingness to go beyond the most external manifestations of the social issues they portrayed. Others reflected a real disorientation and pessimism, evidenced in a reliance on sensationalism and crude cinematic shock tactics.

The Feast of the Goat is a Spanish production directed by Peruvian born filmmaker Luis Llosa and based on the novel by his cousin, the right-wing writer and former Peruvian presidential candidate Mario Vargas Llosa. The movie explores some of the dark secrets of a middle class family during the last years of the brutal dictatorship of President Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina (played by Tomas Milian). Trujillo ruled the Dominican Republic from 1930 until May 30, 1961, when he was assassinated.

In 1992, Urania Cabral (Isabella Rossellini), a successful New York-based lawyer, returns to the Dominican Republic, having suddenly fled her country some 30 years earlier. The purpose of her visit is to confront her 80-year-old stroke-afflicted father Augustin (Paul Freeman) about his past.

The film alternates between a dinner party organised by Urania's family to celebrate her return, and a series of flashbacks that she introduces and partially narrates. These include several interrelated incidents involving Trujillo, Urania and her father, and lead up to the dictator's assassination. As the story progresses, Urania more and more openly confronts her father who, although unable to speak, is increasingly distressed by his daughter's revelations.

Trujillo is accurately portrayed as a ruthless megalomaniac, who revels in other people's misery. In one incident, he sacrifices one of his officers in order to cover up an embarrassing international scandal. In another, he sleeps with the wife of one of his generals and then loudly boasts about it to leading local politicians and army personnel. On another occasion, Trujillo "suggests" to his newly appointed personal guard not to marry the fiancée he loves because it would interfere with his ambitions.

Urania is also the dictator's victim. On the advice and suggestion of another officer, Urania's politically disgraced father "offers" his beautiful

teenage daughter to the president in order to re-establish his career in Trujillo's regime. Urania, completely unaware of the situation, is taken to Trujillo's country house, where she is sexually abused.

In the end, a number of senior military figures who have been disgraced by Trujillo organise his assassination. Thirty years later, Urania is unable to forgive her father for sacrificing her innocence and honour to save his own position and privileges.

While director Llosa explores important subject matter, the film is seriously flawed. Llosa places too much emphasis on Trujillo as an "evil" individual, without any real examination of the political and historical processes that produced him and his cruel regime.

The assassination, for example, is like a mafia hit, and for those who know nothing about Dominican Republic history, appears to be driven purely by pride and other personal factors. Llosa gives little consideration to the role played by American imperialism in Trujillo's rise and fall. In fact, the American diplomats who do make a brief appearance are presented as benign political figures.

It is well known, however, that Washington politically "educated" and sustained Trujillo, a vicious racist, over many years. During the US occupation of the Dominican Republic (1916-1924), he joined the National Guard and was trained by the US marines to maintain order in the wake of the occupation. After a quick rise to high rank, Trujillo overthrew President Horacio Vasquez in 1930 and remained in power, with American support, for most of the next three decades.

Trujillo introduced various national development measures during his rule and gained some international attention during the 1930s for allowing European Jews to migrate to the Dominican Republic. His decision was not motivated by genuine concern for the plight of Jewish refugees, however. Trujillo shared many of Hitler's racialist views, but believed that the immigration of European Jews would "whiten" the Dominican Republic. It was on this basis that he allowed Spanish Republican refugees to settle in the country as well.

During the mid-1930s, as the impact of a depression in sugar prices impacted on the economy, Trujillo began denouncing Haiti, which shares the Caribbean island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic. He and his supporters falsely claimed that Haitians had darker skin, were therefore inferior, and posed a serious threat to jobs in the Dominican Republic. In October 1937, he ordered the slaughter of more than 20,000 Haitian sugar workers.

Trujillo later sided with the allies during World War II, and in the post-war period his vehement anti-communism made him an important "friend" of the United States. However the Cuban revolution, which overthrew the corrupt Batista regime in 1959, coupled with Trujillo's extreme dictatorial measures, saw a shift in US policy. Washington increasingly began to regard Trujillo as a destabilising factor in the region

and in 1960, after Trujillo's agents tried to assassinate the Venezuelan president, began to move against him.

In August 1960 the US broke diplomatic relations with the Dominican Republic, recalled most of its personnel, imposed economic sanctions and began conspiring with dissident elements inside the country. CIA agents made clear to Washington that Trujillo should be prevailed upon to quit. If he refused, he should be eliminated. While the film vaguely alludes to this, there is no reference to American "dirty tricks," let alone to the previous US support for Trujillo's regime and his racist massacres.

Trujillo was, without doubt, a sadistic and ruthless dictator. But simply portraying this does not explain very much. His methods were part and parcel of the political power he wielded on behalf of the local ruling elite and as an American ally in the Caribbean. When geo-political relations in the region changed, he was as expendable as many of those he had disposed of or abused. But none of this is evident in the film, or even, it appears, to have been taken into consideration.

Secuestro Express, a debut feature written and directed by Jonathan Jakubowicz, was the highest grossing film in Venezuela last year. Its title means "speedy kidnapping".

According to the movie's press notes, there is at least one kidnapping every hour of the day in Venezuela. Those abducted are usually from wealthy families, and the criminals are often paid a hefty ransom. Up to 70 percent of hostages are murdered.

Secuestro Express is developed around one such kidnapping. Three kidnappers from the city slums—Budu (Pedro Perez), Niga (Carlos Madera) and Trece (Carlos Julio Molina)—abduct Carla (Mia Maestro), the beautiful daughter of an affluent Caracas doctor, and Martin (Jean Paul Leroux), her rich fiancé and social playboy.

Viewers are taken on a journey of excessive violence, with lots of shouting, death threats, drug abuse, corrupt police and sex. All this at such an unbearably fast pace that one barely has time to draw breath, let alone register what is going on.

One critic has hailed Jakubowicz's film as an "action thriller", a "poetic treatise on the devastation of class conflict, and a social commentary on the chasm between the rich and poor". These claims are bogus. *Secuestro Express* is neither a gripping thriller nor a serious exploration of social inequality but a distasteful work that is deeply pessimistic and exploitative. It provides no social insights and simply sensationalises its subject matter.

Characterisations are poor, with individuals introduced at the beginning of the film in freeze-frames accompanied by glib inter-titles, such as: "Buda. Criminal. Sentimental father."

An exchange between kidnapped Carla and Trece—the more "conscientious" kidnapper, described in the inter-title at the beginning of the film as "the romantic," is typical of the movie's superficial dialogue.

Carla says she's on the side of the oppressed and a volunteer worker for the poor. He angrily responds that she shouldn't have been driving an expensive car and wearing nice clothes when half of the city is starving. This exchange, one of the few that actually refers to inequality, does not enlighten anyone.

Later, in one of the film's more distasteful moments, a title appears, cynically declaring: "Half the world is hungry, the other half obese. There are two options. Kill the monster or invite him to dinner." It is not clear what this glib comment is supposed to mean. Is Jakubowicz calling for social reconciliation or proposing bloody vengeance? Whatever the case, *Secuestro Express* provides no suggestion that humanity is capable of providing any progressive solution to its current predicament.

Favela Rising, a documentary directed by Matt Mochary and Jeff Zimbalist, is set in Brazil's Vigario Geral, one of the hundred slums (favelas) that surround Rio de Janeiro. It won this year's international critics (FIPRESCI) jury prize at the Sydney Film Festival and has received a number of other international awards since its release. The film

documents ex-drug dealer Anderson Sa's attempts to lure the favela's poor and disenfranchised youth away from drug trafficking and criminal violence using Afro-Reggae music—a blend of rock, samba and hip-hop.

Anderson Sa, who was born and raised in the slums, is an interesting and likeable figure. Such is the poverty and violence in the slums that one of his most vivid childhood memories is going shopping with his mother and witnessing a man being shot in the head. Sa became a drug trafficker in his early teens but abandoned this path and turned to music after the notorious Vigario Geral massacre, when the Brazilian police indiscriminately murdered 21 men—including Sa's uncle—and youths. The police actions were in response to the murder of four officers by drug traffickers.

Sa explains how he was more or less obsessed with thoughts of taking revenge on the police, but changed his mind on considering the implications—further police retribution—and decided instead to abandon drug trafficking and form a band. His band, and Afro-Reggae music, grew in popularity, and Sa decided to invest all his income into organising percussion and dance classes for favela youth and promoting non-violence. The band achieved such recognition and popularity that it was offered a valuable recording contract.

Sa is, without doubt, courageous and genuinely concerned for the slum youth. He clearly recognises that the principal cause of the violence and trafficking in Brazil's slums is poverty, unemployment and the lack of basic facilities and opportunities for youth. In one slum area, coined the "Bosnia of Brazil", almost 4,000 juveniles lost their lives in a 14-year period, about nine times the death rate of young people in Israel and Palestine over the same time.

Favela Rising's strongest moments are those recording conditions in the favelas, interviews with Sa and old archive footage of the Vigario Geral massacre. The scenes of favela youth dancing to, and playing, Afro-Reggae music are also very endearing—the music is energetic, catchy and its lyrics are somewhat socially progressive, in stark contrast to gangster rap and other debased musical genres.

However, the political outlook guiding Sa and the Afro-Reggae platform is profoundly limited, and the filmmakers—who obviously share his perspective—are too uncritical. Neither the filmmakers nor Sa question the very existence of the slums or why they should exist in a city dominated by ultra modern facilities and countless multi-millionaires living only a stone's throw away. This weakens the overall impact of the film.

No doubt the dance and percussion schools have had a progressive impact on some youth and helped to steer them away from violence and drugs. These are important initiatives but, in the long term, they leave unchallenged the very system that produces such gross inequality. There is also the danger that *Favela Rising* will encourage illusions that there is some individual or short-term answer to the poverty that blight the lives of millions of youth, workers and peasants in Brazil. More social probing is required.

Sandra Werneck's documentary *Teen Mothers* is also set in the Rio slums and follows four pregnant girls, who range in age from 13 to 15 years. In all four cases, the teenagers want to keep their babies.

Teen Mothers establishes fairly convincingly the correlation between the social conditions of the favela girls and their desire to have children at such a young age. The teenagers live in abject poverty, with minimal education and no opportunities. They have nothing in their lives to look forward to and, following their own mothers, see having children as a means of acquiring a purpose in life.

Werneck is a capable director and displays real compassion for the girls, their boyfriends and parents. She carefully establishes the horrible conditions of the slum homes—small, overcrowded, with barely any facilities—and the interviews with the girls are handled well, especially the one with 13-year-old Evelin. Often, after a serious discussion about motherhood and what she expects from it, she laughs infectiously,

reminding the viewer that she is, after all, just a child. We later learn that her boyfriend was murdered four months after the film was made.

Teen Mothers has some sensitive moments, but falls far short of sensitising its viewers on a more profound level. Again, as in *Favela Rising*, it lacks insight into the social and political processes that have produced this horrendous poverty. The film is more a passive observer than a critical *opponent* of these terrible conditions.

To be continued



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