



Patron: Jim Broadbent

Registered Charity No. 1156478

Friday October 11th, 2024

Io Capitano (15)

Dir: Matteo Garrone

with: Seydou Sarr, Moustapha Fall, Issaka Sawadogo

This review is reproduced with the kind permission of Sight and Sound magazine

(The synopsis below reveals plot details)

Synopsis: Seydou and Moussa, two Senegalese cousins, leave their hometown to escape poverty. They transit through Mali with false passports. The forgery is discovered but they avoid prison in exchange for money. They pay to join a group crossing the desert on foot with a guide into Libya. Rebels intercept them they are taken to a smuggler-run prison, under threat of torture and slavery. They are separated. Seydou finds work as a bricklayer and searches for Moussa. They are reunited in Tripoli and seek passage on a boat to Italy with other refugees. Seydou is forced to take charge and pilots the boat successfully to Sicily.

Along with the many unscrupulous people *Io Capitano's* young hero Seydou (Seydou Sarr) and his friend Moussa (Moustapha Fall) meet during their travels from their hometown in Senegal to an uncertain fate on the edge of Europe, there are more surreal figures as well – such as, in one of the film's signature images, a woman who floats in mid-air. Elements of dream, myth and fantasy continually intrude on what might otherwise seem like a hard-nosed portrayal of the ordeals faced by migrants on their journeys across Africa and into the treacherous waters beyond the continent's northern coast.

In part, this slippage is indicative of its protagonist's youthful perspective. Part of a lively, happy household, Seydou is presented as an upbeat but naïve teenager, who's all too susceptible to his buddy's big talk about the more exciting life that awaits the duo in Europe, a mirage promoted by the media images they consume on their phones. They're motivated not by deprivation, but by a lust for adventure, a distinction that the film emphasises with its references to the questing heroes of Homer.

But the film's slides between naturalistic and fantastical modes are emblematic of the conflicting predilections of *Io Capitano's* director, too. Compared to the more reliably flamboyant ways of his Italian compatriots and fellow festival mainstays Luca Guadagnino and Paolo Sorrentino, Matteo Garrone has often demonstrated a steelier sensibility and a keen interest in the brute mechanics of the systems that entrap his characters, like the crime syndicate portrayed in his Cannes prizewinner *Gomorrah* (2008). He revisited that milieu with the brutal demi-monde of *Dogman* (2018), and here finds another analogue in the shadow world into which his two innocents descend, a perilous realm filled with counterfeit-passport suppliers, utterly indifferent desert guides, bribe-seeking policemen



and vicious gangsters. It all constitutes a wider apparatus that operates with the same well-honed efficiency and according to the same merciless code deployed by the Camorra in *Gomorrah*; that's especially true of the torture rooms awaiting the least fortunate travellers in a makeshift prison in Libya.

But as Garrone revealed in *Tale of Tales* (2015), his alternately fanciful and grisly adaptation of stories by Giambattista Basile, and his 2019 version of *Pinocchio*, the filmmaker is hardly averse to more florid and ostentatious gestures. An early scene in which Seydou drums for an ecstatic dance performance by his mother and sisters foreshadows a series of similarly heightened moments, along with several detours into fairytale-like fantasy and magic realism.

This combination of approaches can sometimes be jarring. But it does allow *Io Capitano* to diverge from the more earnest and predictable tone prevalent among recent films about the migrant experience. Moreover, with its greater focus on the journey rather than the destination (and the difficulties faced there), Garrone's film is more closely akin to predecessors such as Boris Lojkine's *Hope* (2014) than it is to Jonas Carpignano's *Mediterranea* (2015) and Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne's *Tori and Lokita* (2022).

Sadly, the above list illustrates how the global cinema marketplace typically devotes more resources and attention to white European directors who tackle African subjects than it does to equivalents by African or African diasporan filmmakers. It was no surprise to see Garrone's more comfortably middlebrow effort advance much further in the Oscar race in the International Feature category than bolder hopefuls such as C.J. Obasi's *Mami Wata* and Ramata-Toulaye Sy's *Banel & Adama* (both 2023).

But *Io Capitano* still bustles with energy and vivid details drawn from Garrone's research and the real-life experiences of former migrants, many of whom worked on set alongside the director. The episodic, road-movie structure often works in its favour, allowing for continual shifts in tone as nightmares like the boys' desert ordeal give way to gentler passages. In the most beguiling scene, Seydou enjoys a respite from his sufferings alongside a fatherly protector played by the great Burkinabé actor Issaka Sawadogo. The film is also rescued from its more precious and sentimental excesses by the power and complexity of Sarr's central performance. Demonstrating the young character's resilience in the face of ever-worsening horrors, he ensures Seydou becomes something other than an emblem of a global crisis. Instead, he's

utterly compelling as a youngster who must find a means to rebuild himself and persist, all while contending with the awful knowledge of how reckless and foolish his quest turned out to be.

Credits

Seydou	Seydou Sarr
Moussa	Moustapha Fall
Martin	Issaka Sawadogo
Ahmed	Hichem Yacoubi
Charlatan	Doodou Sagna
Seydou's mother	Ndeye Khadi Sy
Sisco	Oumar Diaw
Policeman	Mamadou Sani
Passport man	Joe Lassana
Bouba	Bamar Kane
Desert lady	Beatrice Gnonko
Director	Matteo Garrone,
Screenplay	Matteo Garrone, Matteo Ceccherini et al
Cinematography	Paolo Carnera
Music	Andrea Farri
Editing	Marco Spoletini
Casting	Constance Demontoy, Iman Djionne
Production design	Dimitri Capuani

Italy 2023. 122mins

Another View

The case of Senegalese migrant Ibrahima Bah, who has been found guilty of gross negligence manslaughter after seeking asylum in the UK, has recently made headlines. He was chosen to steer the small boat on which some of his fellow passengers died, and feared his life would be in danger if he did not. According to news reports his conviction is unprecedented.

One of the characters in Italian filmmaker Matteo Garrone's (*Gomorrah*, *Dogman*) compassionate Homeric odyssey, which follows two young men from Dakar who dream of a better life in Europe and embark on a terrifying journey, is faced with the exact same conundrum as Bah. Garrone was advised by three people who had made a similar voyage and in *Io Capitano* he threads together the real-life stories to illustrate the gruelling crossing from a migrant's perspective.

The film begins in a colourful and cosy place where we meet Seydou (Seydou Sarr) and his family, including his mother and sisters, as they plan their outfits for a dance performance. He is the only man in the house and it is clear he has pressing matters on his mind. With his cousin Moussa (Moustapha Fall) he has been saving money to make his way to Italy and the time to leave is coming soon. Money is tight, but they are getting by. Their motivations are innocent and they sincerely believe they will have more opportunities abroad.

Garrone intentionally sets the film off as a voyage of discovery for the two boys, with uplifting music and laughter, but the reality is grim. Biting realist social commentary and magical realism sit side by side as excitement turns to dread and horrific scenes of torture and dehumanisation play out. Sequences set in a Libyan prison are particularly brutal. When it all becomes too much for the boys, Garrone turns their disassociation into surreal fantasy using folklore and the desert as beautiful backdrop.

Comparisons to Mati Diop's *Atlantics* which also took inspiration from Greek mythology and Wolof folklore can be made. She turned the story of young Senegalese men making the treacherous crossing into a supernatural tale of longing and despair, and took alarming statistics into account with the foregone conclusion of death.

Garrone takes a different, less radical approach by giving his characters hope and, in turn, the audience something to cling on to in terms of a will they/won't they make it narrative.

The superb casting of the two lead co-stars, who were only told the outcome of their characters storylines on the day of shooting, really buoys the film. Sarr and Fall are wonderful young actors and excel in displaying joy and fear, presenting a warming and believable brotherly dynamic. Sarr's performance in particular is so mesmerisingly credible that even as the film plays out to a familiar beat his star shines brightly.

Katherine McLaughlin: Little White Lies

Our next screening: Friday October 25th, 7.30pm *Àma Gloria (France 2023)*

W. C. Fields is said to have held that one should never work with children and animals because of their unpredictability and tendency to steal the show. Never is this more clearly demonstrated - at least as far as children are concerned - than in this film. 6 year old Louise Pauroy-Panzani delivers an absolutely star-making turn as Cléo, who is heartbroken to learn that her beloved nanny Gloria is to leave the family home in Paris and return to Cape Verde, to deal with some urgent family matters. She persuades her father to allow her to travel to the island to stay with Gloria, a coming-of-age experience that will change her life. Writer-director Maria Amachoukeli's captivating film contains other vivid performances but it's Mauroy-Panzani who grabs the headlines.