

Black Doh jumps out to sea... and raps



David Bangoura, a.k.a. Black Doth, cutting his first record, *Cruzando el mar*.

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FILM REVIEW

Humankind goes to war mostly for economic reasons. The ravages of war cause migration waves to more welcoming and safer territories. Filmmaker Rubén Plataneo couldn't shake this thought off his head after his immigrant grandparents gave him a detailed account of the reasons that pushed them to seek a better future crossing the Atlantic to start from scratch. More often than not, the children and descendants of immigrants hear about this trip and give no second thought to it. But Plataneo's case was different — his grandparents' account was so vivid, so meticulously detailed and painful, that he felt the irrepressible compulsion to keep a record, even if metaphorical, of this great trip.

That record, or log, to use a maritime term that fits the context, materialized in his feature film debut *El gran río*, premiering today in BA at the Gaumont, Arte Cinema and Cosmos movie theatres. The story of a young man's journey from Europe across the Atlantic to Argentina is just one instance of a displacement experience. It was not Plataneo's intention to recreate on screen that feat of a journey. Rather, he wanted to paint a larger picture. But it was not through a monumental migration that he chronicled his grandparents' voyage.

It was back to square one, that is, to an individual account — a contemporary one — when he made the acquaintance, then the friendship, of David Bangoura, a.k.a. Black Doh, an immigrant from Guinea who landed on the port of San Lorenzo, near Rosario, after travelling as a stowaway on a Vietnamese cargo ship.

It was not war, it was not poverty that prompted the young David to jump on a boat with an uncertain destination. It was the need to find a place of his own, even if it meant being torn apart from family and friends.

At first sight, *El gran río* is the account of Black Doh's trip from a distant land and an utterly different world to an equally dissimilar milieu: Rosario, in the Province of Santa Fe.

Black Doh spoke not one word of Spanish when he disembarked. Back in Guinea, everyone survived speaking three languages: soussou at home, and French and English for schooling and social and business activities.

Black Doh's communication problem was further compounded by the fact that, as he charmingly explains at the start of *El gran río*, "yo no daba el perfil correcto," by which he meant that being black in a country like Argentina, where blackness has long been denied, hindered his possibilities when it came to finding a job or just a place to crash on other than a park.

But there's no bitterness in Black Doh's words. A natural-born storyteller, Black Doh grew up listening to African music and learnt to rap as a child, and this is clearly evident in his narrative, marked by his peculiar, endearing accent. Black Doh is a charmer, and his yarn, as captured by director Plataneo, is captivating and enthralling. And this is probably the reason why, his broken Spanish notwithstanding, he takes no time in

making good friends out in the street, where he sells *quincaillerie* and personal accessories, an activity blacks are stereotypically associated with here. Black Doh is just following and sticking to this misconception because he has an unbreakable will to survive, and peddling *bijouterie* will buy food and afford modest lodgings.

Black Doh, as he likes to call himself and have others call him, is an artist, a musician — a rapper, more accurately. Of all the places he could have landed in after alighting the Vietnamese freighter, it is Rosario where Black Doh finds his home away from home, the place where, thanks to his cheerful nature and assimilation capacity, he makes good friends who share his passion for rap. And Rosario, as he likes to say with a mixture of candour and appreciation, "is full of very beautiful girls."

El gran río starts in majestic fashion: a sweeping view of the port of Rosario, the bow of an old ship, the sun gleaming on the horizon, the water lapping up the shoreline. The scene is set to haunting instrumental music that bespeaks faraway ports of call, strange lands, unknown destinations. It's full of promise.

The light then changes to subdued, far less spectacular shades, and moves on to downtown Rosario, where Black Doh starts to spin his yarn. The story is interspersed with footage from his hometown of Conakry, Guinea, focusing on a hamlet where life is simple and a bit precarious, but where shiny, solid colours materialize in the women's handmade garments.

Plataneo's *El gran río* is not a biopic as such, in spite of all the traits in common with this film genre. It's a fine, lovingly crafted documentary, a film with an engaging story to tell, and a most suitable on-screen narrator whose life, most likely, reflects the sojourn of us all and the mutually enriching cultural encounter resulting from an amalgam of ethnicities, cultures and life experiences.

Black Doh certainly knows how to rap, and so does everyone involved in the making of this beautiful sojourn entitled *El gran río*, which might as well bear the title of Black Doh's first album: *Cruzando el mar*.

PRODUCTION NOTES

El gran río. Argentina, 2012. In Spanish, French and soussou. Written and directed by: Rubén Plataneo. With: David Bangoura, DonQ, Martín Plendebury. Filmed in Argentina and Guinea. HD/35mm. Distributed by: Rubén Plataneo. NR. Running time: 97 minutes.

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