

# Elefante blanco: sacramental showdown

Pablo Trapero's new film is an overwhelming account of life on the fringe of society

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## FILM REVIEW



*Jérémie Renier and Ricardo Darín in a scene from Elefante blanco.*

In most cosmopolitan capitals extreme poverty is, more often than not, found side by side with the type of splendour normally associated with capitalist, financial or governmental corruption. Humans are naturally prone to territorialism, and every inch of space stepping over strictly laid-out borders may become the subject of heated argument and conflagration. It runs across ethnicities, nationalities, political or religious affiliation, socioeconomic standing, the way you dress or smell, the kind of cooking you do at home, the stigmas attached to specific segments of society.

In Buenos Aires, the newest, unashamedly rich district is called Puerto Madero, the majestic, fenced-off tower homes and office space resembling New York's skyline. This material paradise is close, very close to the shanties next to Retiro train and bus station, not to mention the Rodrigo Bueno settlement by the side of the Nature Reserve.

The point is that the distance between the SUV-driving royalty and the perennially destitute is not far removed. From ivory tower to a view from the gutter everything is within your field of vision.

**BEHIND THE WALL.** Filmmaker Pablo Trapero certainly took a risk and a good, hard look at marginalia before writing, casting, producing and filming *Elefante blanco*, which has made it to Cannes' *Un certain regard* section.

The *elefante blanco* (white elephant) in Pablo Trapero's eponymous film is the phantasmagorical structure of what was to be Latin America's biggest hospital, construction of which was approved in 1937 and started in 1938.

In line with Argentina's sociopolitical upheaval, the project was never completed and is now home to thousands of outcasts who live among rubble, rats, pollution, illness, crime, deadly drug lords' feuds.

Trapero's *Elefante blanco*, focusing on the painstaking work of two shanty-town priests and a social worker, is a trip through urban hell. Contrary to the barrage of political harangue we are subjected to on a daily basis, *Elefante blanco* lays out the bare facts: a Third World country playing welfare state but in reality struggling to stay afloat. No other aborted social project could make such a visible, powerful impact as the *elefante blanco*, palpable proof that not everyone is given the same possibilities to attain social mobility and think ahead to a better future.

In such a bleak social landscape, though, there's always bound to be a group of believers and fighters. In Trapero's fiction, it's Catholic priests Julián (Ricardo Darín) and Gerónimo (Jéremie Renier), plus social worker Luciana (Martina Gusmán). Structured as a classic narrative, *Elefante blanco* is an emotional journey, starting with two gripping epigrams: a closeup of an MRI scan performed on Father Julián, and Father Gerónimo escaping a massacre in the Amazon.

Mr. Trapero, whose previous work was the arresting, action-packed *Carancho*, has perfected his craft to such an extent that *Elefante blanco* needs no fireworks or spectacular twists to make its point. A veritable architectural feat, *Elefante blanco* concentrates on personal struggle and tragedy to show us a much larger picture.

**TRIPTYCH.** There are three main players in *Elefante blanco*: the shantytown dwellers submerged in a world without hope; the religious and secular forces committed to bringing some measure of dignity to these people; and the invisible powers that prevent a more just social distribution of wealth.

From take 1 to end credits, *Elefante blanco* has an overwhelmingly real statement to make. As a man of the Church, Father Julián has devoted his entire life to bringing spiritual relief and even material solutions to shanty dwellers caught in the crossfire between feuding crack manufacturers and dealers, violent death at the hand of ruthless thugs and the police, and the foreboding of an inexorable fate.

The emotional and sociopolitical drama moves in synch with the deceptively simple narrative structure of *Elefante blanco*. Father Julián has always been there for his beloved children of God, regardless of religious affiliation or credence. He is staunchly determined to perform what amounts to a near miracle: improving the lot of the have-nots around him, providing proper shelter and food, education, health services, and justice.

Father Gerónimo has survived a carnage in the Amazon, where he and other men tried to spread the Gospel and bring about social change. Bearing the weight of guilt for being the sole survivor of a massacre, Father Gerónimo readily accepts the chance to continue his religious devotion and his social commitment: he accepts the daunting task of performing as a *cura villero*.

On the secular front but on the same side of the fence, social worker Luciana fights government bureaucracy and indifference, overall malaise at the heart of the shanty, and a world that's cold wherever you stand.

**CLOSER.** Developing as a linear drama against the background of utter poverty and violence, *Elefante blanco*, if you care to pay close

attention, makes a sociopolitical statement that is hard to contest. But thanks to Trapero's dexterity as screenwriter and filmmaker, the film makes a blunt point without overemphasis. *Elefante blanco*, indeed, is scripted so intelligently as to convey its message without hammering it home.

Trapero has once again entrusted actor Ricardo Darín with the colossal task of playing a man at a crossroads. In *Elefante blanco*, Darín's Father Julián sees all glimmer of hope crash against an unsurmountable wall. Darín, the finest actor of his generation, dutifully complies. In *Carancho* (his previous work in collaboration with Trapero), Darín shifted gears from indifferent worker to a most believable action hero with unflinching resolve.

In *Elefante blanco*, Darín's eyes and face, once radiant and youthful, start to sag under the weight of impossibility and infinitely long years behind the barricade. Empathy with Darín's Father Julián is almost immediate, as is his heartwrenching desolation and despair at a world that won't listen.

Father Gerónimo is played by Belgian actor Jérémie Renier with admirable mien, miles away from his boyish phase with the Dardenne brothers. Aged 31 in real life, Renier transmogrifies into a slightly older man still able to fight all odds. As the mediator between the inside and the outside, actress Martina Gusmán blends with natural ease with the two worlds she must inhabit.

**SHOOTING.** Production-wise, *Elefante blanco* is impeccable, awesome, dazzling. The film bears witness to Mr. Trapero's unstoppable growth as a filmmaker, the man without whom a story like *Elefante blanco's* could have easily become cheap propaganda.

If *Carancho* received critical and public acclaim for its ability to blend social realism with cross-genre filmmaking, *Elefante blanco* goes a step forward. Developing linearly towards a climactic end, Mr. Trapero, without resorting to distracting subplots, has made a montage film with a seamless narrative.

Further proof of Mr. Trapero's superior filmmaking is the way he successfully makes crossbreed movies. Part testimony, part dramatization of personal quest, *Elefante blanco* daringly throws in

elements drawn from classical western showdown, the type of defining confrontation between good and evil that seals a crusade.

Although Mr. Trapero does not graft unneeded subplots, there is one scene in *Elefante blanco* which, in another context, would have caused ripples, especially among fundamentalist Catholics. It's hardly the case here, for the subject and theme dealt with in *Elefante blanco* amply exceed the minutiae of egotistic dogma.

## **PRODUCTION NOTES**

*Elefante blanco*. Argentina / Spain, 2012. In Spanish. Written and directed by: Pablo Trapero. Cinematography by: Guillermo Nieto. Produced by: Matanza Cine / Morena Films / Patagonik Film Group. With: Ricardo Darín, Jérémy Renier, Martina Gusman. NC16. Distributed by: Buena Vista. Running time:106 minutes.