

Friday, November 7th 2014

Metro Manila (15)

UK/Philippines, 2013

dir: Sean Ellis

starring: Jake Macapagal, John Arcilla, Althea Vega

sponsor: Paul Hancocks (LFS member)

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

For roughly two thirds of its running time, the immersive and atmospheric third feature from British director Sean Ellis slots neatly into the sub-genre of films that depict ill-equipped hill-billy types struggling to adjust to the hurly-burly of busy metropolitan centres (think *Midnight Cowboy*). *Metro Manila* posits the city as a carnivorous presence in its own right bearing down on yokel-like subjects and offering them a stark challenge: fight or die. While the local tourist board might object to the film's representation of Manila as a ruthless neon cesspool, Ellis makes it clear that his film's perspective is filtered through the subjective experience of the naïve Oscar (a slightly bland Jake Macapagal) and his family, who have come down from the rural north in search of more lucrative employment. Only when the city has fully corrupted their innocence (he becomes involved in crime, she undertakes debasing work in a sleazy club) does the film segue into a more conventional, if neatly plotted, heist thriller.

It would have been easy for Ellis to overdo the luridness here, but he should be commended for his restraint. Unlike, say, Brillante Mendoza's extremely difficult to watch *Kinatay* (2009) – which used the graphic state-conceived rape, torture and murder of a prostitute as a microcosm of institutional corruption in the Philippines – Ellis depicts the horrors visited on the family in a less explicit manner, emphasising the creeping insidiousness of financially motivated corruption. For example, exactly how Oscar's penniless wife Mai (Althea Vega) persuades a doctor to cure her daughter's chronic toothache is left to the imagination, but we can assume it cannot have been by savoury means. Similarly, the casualness with which Mai's boss suggests she pimp out her nine year old daughter is all the more chilling for being so underplayed. In the film's most powerful sequence, Ellis cross-cuts a scene of Mai being physically preyed on in a club by a lecherous westerner with shots of Oscar inexplicably bursting into a



juddering crying jag while drinking with his new colleagues. It's a mite melodramatic but undeniably effective in the light of how sensitively Ellis observes the family's dynamic throughout.

Intriguingly, *Metro Manila* is bookended by haunting references to a real-life incident in Manila in 2010, in which a man named Reginald Chua hijacked a plane and died after jumping out with a parachute made of silk produced in his father's factory. The same story was also used as the basis for Filipino film-maker Raymond Red's drama *Manila Skies* (2009, as yet unreleased in the UK.) Both film-makers clearly saw in the tragic tabloid-ready story an allegorical relevance to the extent of the widespread economic desperation in the Philippines, and both deserve credit for imbuing harrowing tales of quotidian hardship with a powerfully allusive and poetic dimension.

Synopsis: The Philippines, present day. To escape the poverty of the northern Banaue district, rice farmer Oscar, his pregnant wife Mai and their two young daughters travel to Manila, the capital city. Oscar is soon ripped off by a conman, and the family wind up living in a slum. Oscar is offered steady, if dangerous, work as a security guard for an armoured truck company, and strikes up a friendship with senior officer Ong. Mai finds dancing work in a sleazy club. Explaining that the security company is likely to frown on Oscar's slum accommodation, Ong installs the family in the apartment he normally keeps for his mistress. Ong tells Oscar the following: that he has kept a lockbox full of money from a bank robbery during which his previous partner and one of the two robbers were killed.; the only way to access the money is to take the key imprint from the company HQ, then make a copy of the key; and that the only way to get into the company HQ is to attend a 'debriefing' a formal process that occurs after guards have been the victims of a robbery. Reluctantly, Oscar agrees to participate in a staged robbery. Before it can occur, Ong is murdered by the surviving criminal from the earlier bank robbery. Oscar finds the lockbox stowed in his new apartment. At HQ, following the 'debriefing', he is caught attempting to steal the key and shot dead by armed guards.

A coda reveals that Oscar managed to hide the key imprint inside a pendant and have it delivered to Mai with his possessions. Mai and the girls leave Manila with the money.

Credits

Oscar Ramirez: Jake Macapagal

Ong: John Arcillo

Mai Ramirez: Althea Vega

Angel Ramirez: Erin Panlilio

Baby Ramirez: Iasha Acejo

Charlie: Angelina Kanapi

Alfred Santos: J. M. Rodriguez

Director.Cinematography: Sean Ellis

Screenplay: Sean Ellis, Frank E. Flowers

Editor: Richard Winter

Producers: Sean Ellis, Mathilde Charpentier

UK/Philippines, 2013: 115 mins

Lincoln Film Society

Patron: Jim Broadbent

Metro Manila's Sean Ellis: 'You don't need to know what an actor is saying'

"In this country," says Sean Ellis "our favourite word is no." Which is why, after making two feature films in the UK and being unable to drum up any interest in a third, the Brighton-born director decamped to the Philippines to shoot a character-based thriller in a country he had only visited once, in a language he didn't understand (Tagalog). The result is *Metro Manila* one of the finest, under-the-radar surprises of the year: the story of a farmer named Oscar who, forced on to the streets of the Filipino capital after the price of rice drops, gets a job as an armoured-truck driver and generally falls into bad company, all so he can take care of his family.

"It was definitely a big adventure," says Ellis, who started out as a photographer. "I was coming off my second film, *The Broken*, which was a bit of a miss really, in terms of finding an audience. And critically, the reviews were very split." He laughs as he remembers his 2008 horror-thriller about a radiologist whose life is turned upside down by a doppelganger who emerges from a broken mirror. "Some of the reviews were quite painful. But it taught me a lot, and I took some time out to rethink things, take on board the mistakes I'd made. I started looking for a project I could keep control of. There were some studio offers, but I felt that would be a mistake. I mean, you're only as hot as your last film, and if people weren't talking about it, you need to be working on something personal. It becomes a dry season. Or director's jail, as I call it."

Inspiration came from a trip to the Philippines to visit a friend. "I didn't know anything about the place. I was quite blown away. It felt very vibrant and rich. It's one of the few places left where you can still get a culture shock – it took me a while to get used to seeing traffic wardens with shotguns. And while I was there, I witnessed this scene: two armoured-truck drivers having an argument by their vehicle. It ended with one of them kicking the truck, then they drove off."

The scenario fascinated Ellis, whose first film was *Cashback*, a short about a daydreaming night worker that was nominated for an Oscar in 2006. "I began writing a synopsis. My most exciting idea was that one of them was being blackmailed into taking part in a heist. Because that's what I saw, in a weird way – one of them clearly seemed trapped. Soon I had 20 pages."

Meanwhile, Canon brought out its 5D digital camera, which gives film-quality results but looks like any unobtrusive holiday-snap camera. "I thought, 'This is kind of interesting. I could go and shoot for a pretty small budget, using a camera system that's very portable and discreet.' So I spent a year doing commercials, using the 5D – it's primarily a stills camera that enables you to record moving images. It put me back in control: I could do my own camerawork and not have a massive crew."

He still needed £250,000. So Ellis remortgaged his house, packed his bags and headed out. "After we got there, it was a case of figuring out how to make the film for the money we had. A lot of people did more than one job, and we were able to get the crew down to two vanloads. It was a very basic, run-and-gun approach. But that was always going to be the style of the film – it had to feel real."

Executive producer Celine Lopez introduced Ellis to the area's small but close-knit film industry, and found Ellis his lead: Jake Macapagal a theatre actor, who in turn brought the rest of the cast. How hard was it to direct an all-foreign team? "Because the Philippines is an ex-protectorate of America, everyone spoke English. So I decided to give each actor the opportunity to translate their lines into Tagalog, the way they felt their character would say things." Was that awkward? "No, not at all! Because I didn't speak Tagalog, I wasn't so bothered about line delivery. Instead, I started watching their body language. I found you didn't really need to know what an actor is saying to know whether it's truthful or not."

Ellis claims he wasn't even fazed by the edit – all eight months of it. "At the end of each day, we'd make a sound file of each edited scene and email it to Jake," he says. "Jake would translate it into English and send it back. A lot of the time, we'd find that the actors had gone off-script and the scene wouldn't make sense! So we'd go back, find the actual line and re-edit. Then once it was all done, we had a Filipino watch it without subtitles, to see if it held together – and it did."

Metro Manila premiered at Sundance in January, taking the audience award for best world dramatic film; its release next month in the Philippines has become national news. Though Ellis is stumped as to what he'll do next, he couldn't be prouder of his "commercial film disguised as an art film". He is in, he says, "a crazy position. I don't know how I'll follow it, but there are some great scripts being sent to me." He laughs. "What was it Michael Caine said? The kind without other people's coffee stains on them."

Damon Wise, *The Guardian*

Our next film: Friday November 14th, 7.30pm

The Lunchbox (PG: India/France/Germany/USA 2013.)

Indian cinema has been so defined by the Bollywood genre that it's hard to remember Satyajit Ray, one of the finest of 20th century film-makers, and his wonderful dramas about the everyday lives and troubles of ordinary people.

While *The Lunchbox* is arguably not in the same class as Ray's films, it is nonetheless a beautiful and sensitively observed story of everyday life, this time in modern-day Mumbai. Irrfan Khan plays Saajan, a single office worker nearing retirement who, thanks to a mistake by one of the *dabbawallahs* (those who deliver lunches across the city) receives a meal prepared by a young housewife for her emotionally indifferent husband. To Saajan's surprise, the food is a vast improvement on his usual meal and, when his note of appreciation is replied to, a correspondence begins between them.

The film a lovely sense of place and the performances by Khan and his co-star Nimrat Kaur are delightful. It echoes *Brief Encounter* in its themes and has the capacity to charm everyone.....even those who don't like subtitles.