

Movie Review: "Sin Nombre" captures the joy and terror of immigrants' trip north through Mexico

by Lee Grant

Cary Joji Fukunaga is a Banana Slug, an alumnus of UC Santa Cruz. That's the UC Santa Cruz Banana Slugs. Go Banana Slugs!

RATINGS GUIDE:

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Go Cary Joji Fukunaga! "Sin Nombre" ("Nameless"), his resplendent Sundance Film Festival hit (best director), is an assured, vividly photographed, finely written, harrowing tale of Central American immigrants grinding their way across Mexico aiming for the U.S. border and a better life.

For his first feature film, Fukunaga, 31, found fresh faces, and wended his way into the spirit of a broken Honduran family and their travails facing not just the challenge of riding atop rickety freight trains but also avoiding the feared Mara Salvatrucha gang of Tapachula, Chiapas, whose dangerous tentacles stretch from El Salvador to Mexico to the United States.

Chilling moment: A gang member escapes the group to head perilously toward the United States. A venomously tattooed jefe wants revenge: "We have to call the leaders in L.A. to get him when he gets there."

Much of this gripping film was shot outside Mexico City atop moving railroad cars. Amid that, a teenage love story blooms between a Honduran girl named Sayra (natural Paulina Gaitan), on the move with her father and uncle, and a Mexican boy (fresh Edgar Flores), seeking escape from the clutches of the gang that ensnared him. On his trail is Lil' Mago (Tenoch Huerta Mejia), a nightmare of brutality.

Fukunaga found a combination of young professional and amateur actors, a gallery of gaunt, fearful and ferocious faces.

Growing up in Oakland, Calif., even in junior high Fukunaga was thinking independently, involved in social issues. A child of divorce, his father was born during World War II in a Japanese internment camp; his mother is Swedish. His stepfather is Mexican-American.

"Sin Nombre" (in Spanish with English subtitles) is an accomplishment that should impress the Hollywood suits (he has a deal with Focus Features, the studio of "Milk" and "Burn After Reading").

What's remarkable is the detail, the richness of characters, the sensitive storytelling. In his research, the soft-spoken Fukunaga rode the trains with hundreds of Guatemalans on their way to Texas, surviving bandit attacks and the treacherous elements.

"If I didn't do something that scared me everyday, I'm not doing my job," he said.

In the film, amid the harshness, there are joyful moments, like when passing through a rural Mexican town, folks toss fruit up to the famished immigrant travelers.

And there's the other side: school kids heaving rocks, "Immigrants, we don't want you here!"

Delving inside the Mara Salvatrucha's universe, there are a slew of look-away scenes. For instance, the initiation of a 12-year-old, first beaten to a pulp and then ordered to kill a captured member of an opposing gang. What's done with the remains is gruesome.

After that, the kid gets a welcoming: "Congratulations, homie! Now, you're part of a family with thousands of brothers." There's also a riveting vignette at a banquet where young men, guns strapped, balance babies on their knees.

At times, the movie has a documentary feel. The cinematography of Adriano Goldman ("City of Men") is daring and exquisite. Fukunaga's goal: "Put the audience into the immigrant experience. Let them experience

the journey."

He takes no stand on the immigration issue. "I didn't make the film to be a propaganda piece for either side," he said.

"Sin Nombre" emerged from his short student work, "Victoria Para Chino" (he's an MFA candidate at New York University), about a truckload of abandoned immigrants who suffocated in Victoria, Texas.

He considers "Sin Nombre" a Western, "lone characters on this path."

Fukunaga is on a fast path. He's no slug.

"Sin Nombre." Rated: R. Running time: 1 hour, 36 minutes. 3.5 stars.

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