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**FILM
BLOG**

The Latin Americans are coming

A wave of Latin American film festivals are sweeping into London in time to take the chill off the long, grey winter



Romeo and Juliet, favela style ... Mare, Our Love Story

During the 2002 World Cup a reporter pal of mine was handed the soccer fan's dream assignment by his paper: every afternoon and evening for the duration of the tournament he had to find the venues – the cafes, clubs and bars – in which the competing nations' expat fans were watching their games and go native for 90 minutes. For the final he chose, not surprisingly, to be Brazilian. Whether he filed his story is a moot point.

Just as this approach to the World Cup was a fabulous way in which to imbibe more deeply of the capital's many cultures, autumns in London offer a run of cinema-led Latin American events that are at once eye-opening, and transporting.

It starts today, with a Brazilian film festival at the Barbican, continues with a celebration of Colombian film, music and literature at the Riverside Studios, then into November with two festivals that reflect the burgeoning output and quality of Latin America cinema that has taken place over the past decade. To attend these events, one would be venturing between EC2 and W6, via tired old WC2; once inside the door, however, it might as well be Rio or Bogotá.

At least that's what I discovered last year, when I embarked on the same sequence of four events, the highlight of which was a screening at the Barbican of *Dona Flor and her Two Husbands*, the dictatorship-era sex comedy and one of the most famous

Brazilian films ever made, in an auditorium where the dominant language was not English, but Portuguese, with a before, after and (I had to adapt) mid-screening ebullience to match.

Such cultural exploration, without leaving one's own city, is quite marvellous. At the same time, the degree to which I felt like a happy outsider did prompt the thought that perhaps not as many non-Brazilians were sharing the experience. This is an ongoing challenge for the organisers of these events, who share the principal objective to promote their cultures to non-Latin Londoners – and correct certain misconceptions about their countries.

"Our first idea was to show the other face of Colombia, to those people whose only image of the country involves drugs, violence and Shakira," says Sandra Tabares, film programmer for Colombiage. "We wanted to create a different, richer understanding, through the films we show and the artists we bring to London. But of course it's also an opportunity to give Colombians, and other Latin Americans a taste of home."

There are a great number of those: an estimated 100,000 Colombians, for example, living in London, and 150,000 Brazilians. But Adriana Rouanet, who has curated the Barbican season Cinema of Brazil: Afro-Brazilian Perspectives, shares Tabare's ambition to promote her country's cinema, and with it "a broad and balanced picture of Brazil" to as diverse an audience as possible.

While most British cinema-goers will only know the meagre menu of drug tales offered by local distributors, Rouanet's smart programme includes such films (Elite Squad, City of Men) but within a wider context. "I wanted to look at the contribution of Afro-Brazilians to the arts, specifically in the past 15 years, since the rebirth of Brazilian cinema, when black actors have gained an incredible amount of space and recognition on screen," she says.

Thus her features include two starring Brazil's most successful black actor, Lorenzo Ramos: the extraordinary Madame Sata, about a legendary Rio drag queen and criminal, and My Uncle Killed a Guy, which features - yes, there is such a thing - a black, Brazilian middle-class family. The festival opener, Mare, Our Love Story, turns the favela stereotype on its head, by transposing West Side Story to the gang war milieu, its ill-fated lovers bonding in a dance school between their warring families' territories. The music and dancing are superb.

To complete the picture, a young director from a Rio favela, one of the many who are starting to tell their own stories on film, will be in London to discuss his work. It's this kind of depth and insight that makes these festivals worth embracing.

So, as we're approaching those dark and chill winter nights, and with fuel ever more expensive, doesn't it make sense to find our warmth from an altogether different source: Latin heat, anyone?

- Cinema of Brazil: Afro-Brazilian Perspectives starts today, until October 15.
- Colombiage takes place at The Riverside Studios October 18 and 19. The film Satanas screens on 16 October.
- London Latin American film Festival, November 7 to November 16.
- The Discovering Latin American Film Festival, November 27 to December 7.

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