

The pain you go through in this country to start a new life ...

By Joanne Laurier
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La Ciudad, written and directed by David Riker; *Bolivia* directed by Adrián Caetano, written by Adrián Caetano and Romina Lafranchini, released on DVD by New Yorker Video

Two films newly released on DVD by New Yorker Video treat the immense hardships immigrant workers face attempting to survive in their adopted countries. US filmmaker David Riker's critically well-received film, *La Ciudad (The City)*, made between 1992 and 1998, presents four stories about immigrants in New York City. For the work, a fictional film with documentary overtones, Riker assembled a primarily nonprofessional cast drawn from neighborhoods with a strong Latin American immigrant presence.

The first of the stories, "Bricks," concerns day-laborers who wait on street corners each morning for work. Vehicles stop and contractors or others offer them low wages for back-breaking labor. The competition per job is fierce and the opportunities to work are few.

A truck arrives; a raspy-voiced contractor offers \$50 for the day. Among the workers climbing into the truck is a father taking care of his young son. The boy is told to wait, presumably for hours, in a nearby store. Crammed into the back of the truck, the workers are kept in the dark as to where they'll be going and what they'll be doing. The camera pans the weary, battered faces of those 'lucky' enough to have been picked to earn a few dollars.

The workers are dumped in the middle of nowhere to clean bricks in a deserted industrial site for \$0.15 per brick. ("I know I promised you \$50, but if you work a little harder you can make twice that amount.") Hostilities among the members of the crew increase until a wall crumbles and pins one of the younger workers under the rubble. Without a vehicle, and with no phone booth in sight, the laborer's injuries prove fatal, causing the group to find solidarity in their grief and anger.

Next, in "Home," the teenage Francisco, newly arrived from Puebla, Mexico, gets lost looking for his uncle's address. Hearing music, he crashes a *Quinceañera* ('sweet

fifteen' birthday party). Francisco is attracted to one of the partygoers, a girl who turns out to be from the same area. Lonely and homesick, she is not long resistant to his charms and offers him a place to stay with her and her uncle.

As they speak more intimately, she tells him of her Mexican relatives' dependence on the money she earns. "I hope you'll have good luck," she says when he describes his plans to make lots of money and have fun. In the early morning, Francisco leaves the apartment while the girl is asleep to get some breakfast for his new love. In an O. Henry-type twist, Francisco's good fortune vanishes when he can't find his way back to the girl in the maze of the public housing complex.

"The Puppeteer" vignette presents a few days in the life of a puppeteer and his daughter who live in a beat-up station wagon on the Brooklyn side of the East River. Not able to read English and suffering from tuberculosis, he supports the two of them by performing Punch and Judy shows in empty lots for street kids. After a cop harasses him for camping out on public property, the father tries to register his daughter for school—only to be told that he must provide a rent receipt. The bureaucratic callousness of the education system, which boasts of enabling every child to get an education, will cause this particular child to slip through the cracks.

The film's last segment, "Seamstress," is about a Mexican woman, Ana, who has been in New York for five years and works in a garment-making sweatshop. In need of \$400 for emergency care for her baby daughter back home, Ana demands her unpaid wages from the factory's manager. "You have to produce," argues the supervisor as he physically tries to eject Ana from the shop floor. "You pay me so little and I work so hard," cries the distraught mother. The hitherto silent workforce stands up for Ana.

In *La Ciudad's* final moments, the screen is filled by a series of photographic portraits. The intimate collection of faces is intended to universalize the film's subject matter. In an interview with PBS, director David Riker described his film as an effort to create "a solidarity capable of opposing

the anti-immigrant fervor that is so rampant.”

In a featurette that accompanies the disc, Riker expands on his motives for making *La Ciudad*. His methods of work with the nonactors, he explains, sought to distill feelings and emotions from the real difficulties of their lives. During the six years of working on the project, Riker and his crew established a high degree of trust within the immigrant community.

He states his purpose is to explore “what it is to be an immigrant today. What it feels like to be uprooted—to leave behind your family, your children, your home, everything that’s familiar and travel to a world of unknowns—a stranger searching for work.

“Already in 1992 when we began making the film, it was clear that the immigrant worker, far from being a marginal character, was becoming the central subject of our time—always spoken about, but never listened to. And my hope in making this film was to invite the immigrants themselves—in this case Latin American immigrants in New York City—to tell their own stories in their own language and in their own words.”

Riker says that when he started the project in 1992, there were approximately 60,000 Mexican immigrants in New York. By the end of filming in 1997, there were between 300,000 and 500,000. Today, there are some 200 languages spoken in the New York metropolitan area.

Referring to the film’s first story, Riker explains that the image of immigrants cleaning old bricks from collapsed industrial buildings, a part of New York’s past, is “a metaphor for what this community was going through”—the “sub-economy of scavenging and recycling” that exists in the city. “I also wanted to make a film that denounced the return of sweatshops in New York City,” says Riker. Another goal was to point out “the deeper pain of being a long-distance” parent.

In addition to struggling against economic insecurity, many immigrants find themselves suspended between two worlds—unable entirely to leave behind the old life in the old country or satisfyingly build a new life in the new one. Letters and phone calls from home rarely yield good news and the emergencies that arise can only be dealt with from great distances and with meager resources. All this *La Ciudad* thoughtfully brings to our attention.

The tabloids, in their crude right-wing populism; government bureaucracies, instinctively cruel to the outsider and the marginalized; trade union officials, with their reactionary-utopian defense of the national borders and national economy—all of these institutions seek to demonize the immigrant. Riker’s film *humanizes* him or her. Against chauvinism and insensitivity, it’s welcome.

Bolivia made in 2001 by Uruguayan-born, Argentine

director Adrián Caetano focuses on the story of Freddy, an illegal Bolivian immigrant in Buenos Aires paid under the table working as a short-order cook in a greasy spoon. The establishment’s down-and-out patrons are resentful that a dark-skinned interloper from another country works while they are either unemployed or barely scraping by.

As the film begins, with Freddy applying for the 15 peso-a-day job (about \$4.75), a television broadcast announces the lineup for an Argentina-Bolivia soccer match. The sportscaster disparages the Bolivian team. His remark that “the Bolivian defense is weak” telegraphs in advance the film’s storyline: there is not much future for a Bolivian underdog in a land of angry, chauvinist locals. The only person who treats Freddy decently is Rosa, another immigrant and waitress at the grubby eatery.

The disc’s liner notes contain clues as to why the movie’s characters are so distasteful in their utter lack of compassion. The director comments that “the film’s main theme is the collision among people of the same social class, they are workers about to be left out of any class at all, and thus they are intolerant towards one another. Basically, they are trapped in a situation they can not escape.”

While the scenario Caetano depicts is not entirely implausible, the director assumes the worst possible outcome. Why?

That Caetano chooses with a certain degree of malice to present the oppressed and disenfranchised layers of the Argentine and Bolivian working class in such a “Lord of the Flies” manner is revealing. It says more about the filmmaker’s pessimism and limited understanding than it does about either population.

Both populations have demonstrated a willingness to make great sacrifices for a better world, and not in the distant past. If other moods prevail or weigh heavily on certain sections of the oppressed at a given moment, it would be better to look to the organizations and political tendencies that have left them in the soup. Caetano’s film, perhaps a sincere effort to be hard-hitting and even self-critical, is simply strained and unappealing.

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