

The Wolfpack, Dope: American experiences, oddities

By Joanne Laurier
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The Wolfpack, directed by Crystal Moselle; *Dope*, written and directed by Rick Famuyiwa

The Wolfpack

At the center of Crystal Moselle's debut film, *The Wolfpack*, winner of the Sundance Film Festival's U.S. Documentary Grand Jury Prize, are seven young people who have been locked away for most of their lives in a New York City public housing apartment. Their father's social fearfulness lies at the heart of this peculiarity.

Six boys and a mentally disabled sister lived with their parents in the Seward Park Extension projects, which house some 800 residents on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Homeschooled by their mother, the children were forbidden by their father, Oscar Angulo, to leave their 16th-floor, four-bedroom apartment.

Confined to one thousand square feet of space, the boys became absorbed in watching films, of which there were some five thousand in the apartment. Making props and costumes and reenacting scenes from their favorite movies became their mode of existence. In Moselle's film, the boys come across as endearing, articulate and emotionally vulnerable. Their long black hair—which their father forbid them to cut—only adds to the mystique. Their overall appearance and the peculiarity of their circumstances, however, tend to distract the viewer from considering what must be serious psychic scars.

Only in the barest outlines does the filmmaker trace out why the Angulo children were confined. Susanne, their mother, briefly explains that she and her husband Oscar were afraid of their offspring being “socialized” by a bad and hazardous world. The *Wall Street Journal* cites Moselle's comment: “It's not like they were chained. ... They were just not socializing with the outside world. They didn't leave the house because they were scared.” She documents the family's odd and fascinating—mostly by virtue of its oddity—story, but seems generally unconcerned with probing the larger questions at work.

The movie's production notes provide a sketch of the

family's background: Peruvian-born Oscar aspired to be a musician. He met and married Susanne, a hippie from the American Midwest, in 1989 and became a Hare Krishna devotee. In 1994, after the birth of five children—Visnu, Bhagavan, Govinda, Narayana and Mukunda—the family traveled around the country looking for opportunities for Oscar to become a rock star, during which time one of the children was birthed in their van. In 1996, the family moved to the Manhattan housing project. There, the last two children—Krsna and Jagadisa—were born.

In *The Wolfpack*, the boys explain that Oscar believes that having a job makes one a social slave and robot. Susanne gets money from the state for homeschooling. Clearly protective of their shy, somewhat bewildered mother, they discuss Oscar's abusive, domineering nature, made worse by his drinking. Only toward the movie's conclusion does a dejected Oscar appear on screen. Earlier, he makes a brief comment regarding the family's shabby living quarters.

In January 2010 Mukunda finally escaped the apartment, wandering the streets wearing a Michael Meyers mask. (Meyers is the psychotic killer in the *Halloween* horror movie series.) He was arrested and spent some time in a hospital psych ward. In April 2010, the brothers started regularly leaving the apartment as a pack, a bizarre vision of dark hair, black suits and sunglasses.

It was at that time that Moselle met the boys. She states in the film's production notes that it “was serendipitous that I met these boys the first week they started going out into the world. It almost felt as if I had discovered a long lost tribe, except it was not from the edges of the world but from the streets of Manhattan. I was moved by their openness, resilience and sense of humor, and I formed a trust with them that could never be duplicated.”

Explaining that it was Oscar who introduced his sons to both classic and cult films, Moselle states that the boys “liked the violent, horrific, morally complicated films the best.” Thus began their obsession with filmmaker Quentin Tarantino [hence the *Reservoir Dogs* look]. “It opened their eyes to film outside the realms of the standard Hollywood

films they were used to watching. Since films were their world, they started to interpret these looks into their wardrobe.”

At one point, the boys explain that their apartment was raided by a police SWAT team looking for a cache of weapons, but finding instead an array of home-made props. Although everyone in the family was handcuffed—a frightening ordeal—the Angulo boys speak about the incident very casually.

In spite of *The Wolfpack*’s somewhat careless construction, it has endearing moments. It is almost heartbreaking, for example, when an emotional Susanne sends the boys off to see their first movie at a cinema (*The Fighter*), acting as if they were traveling to the other side of the world. Or when for the first time in decades Susanne speaks to her mother in Michigan, thrilled like a kid in a candy store. There is also the amusing sequence of the boys at Coney Island, lathering their bodies with sun block (“We don’t need sun. We are vampires.”)

The film never addresses itself to the reasons why Oscar and Susanne are so overwhelmed by the problems of society and especially why Oscar is such a misanthrope. One would have thought that this was rather central to any serious examination of the family’s circumstances. It is telling that Moselle apparently takes all this for granted.

Indeed, the parents’ disorientation is consistent with that of a substantial social layer, and even a portion of a generation. *The Wolfpack* never makes what seems an obvious connection between the father’s view of American society as a bottomless pit of sin and iniquity (crime, violence, drugs, gang activity, etc.) to be shunned at all costs and his sons being drawn to Tarantino’s shallow, sordid output and other gloomy films of the last several decades, like *The Dark Knight*, *Taxi Driver*, *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Don’t these films, in their own way, reflect and even validate precisely the outlook Oscar espoused, that the family needed to be locked away, protected from the dangerous, sinister modern world?

In any event, *The Wolfpack* still intrigues, largely because of the Angulo boys’ liveliness and tenacity.

Dope

Another form of individual effort at escape is at the center of Rick Famuyiwa’s comedy *Dope*, which starts with three dictionary definitions of its title—a term for drugs, a term for someone stupid and a term of high praise.

Malcolm (Shameik Moore) is a high school senior living with his single mom (Kimberly Elise), a bus driver, in the Bottoms, a gang-controlled neighborhood in the city of Inglewood, in southwestern Los Angeles County. He is a self-described “black geek,” a moniker that also applies to

his best friends Jib (Tony Revolori, the lobby boy in Wes Anderson’s *Grand Budapest Hotel*), who claims he’s 14 percent African, and Diggy (Kiersey Clemons), a lesbian whose family tries to “pray away the gay.” Malcolm, who sports an old-fashioned flat-top hairdo and button-down collar, is a straight A student, has aced his SATs, plays in a punk rock band with Jib and Diggy and is determined to get into Harvard.

While the film’s opening sequences are amusing and charming, *Dope* veers off in a convoluted, scrambled direction involving the unloading of drugs that have fallen into Malcolm’s possession (to prove the point—see Wikipedia’s endless plot description). Implausibly, he sets up a clever and successful online drugstore, wowing an admissions officer who turns out to be a drug kingpin!

Moore is worth watching; Revolori and especially Clemons are also amiable. There is nothing cynical about the lead trio. Through them the movie attempts to break down certain stereotypes about “typical” Inglewood residents. Unfortunately, the rest of the film is drenched in clichés and populated with boilerplate bad boys: sneaker-stealing school bullies, neighborhood drug dealers and teens negotiating typical “hood traps.”

While it is refreshing to see a reasonable facsimile of working class youth on screen, most of the film’s better moments end up by sermonizing, along the lines of platitudes such as “Don’t underestimate yourself” and “Always aim high.”

Famuyiwa (*The Wood*, 1999, and *Brown Sugar*, 2002) has a reputation for making films that dare “to show middle-class blacks as ordinary Americans.” This seems a pretty limited and limiting ambition. While individuals like the overachiever Malcolm may well escape the relatively mean streets of Inglewood, *Dope* seems largely unconcerned with the majority condemned to remain.

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