



Stockbridge Community Cinema

Programme Notes 15 NOVEMBER 2024

Io Capitano

Italy Belgium France | 2023 | 121 min | Cert 15

Director: Matteo Garrone

Screenplay: Matteo Garrone, Massimo Ceccherini, Massimo Gaudioso

Starring: Seydou Sarr, Moustapha Fall, Issaka Sawadogo



Spoiler warning: these notes are best read after viewing the film as they contain plot and character details.

This article by Jason Anderson appeared in Sight and Sound on 5 April 2024

Senegalese youngsters Seydou and Moussa, keen to pursue a music career, leave Dakar for Europe. Their journey takes them across a vast expanse of desert, where they encounter vicious bandits and brutal authorities, then face the perils of a dangerous Mediterranean crossing.

Matteo Garrone's powerful drama was thoroughly researched, using first-hand accounts of the journey to map out the youngsters' plight. The heart of the film is Seydou Sarr's extraordinary performance, aided in no small part by breathtaking cinematography, moments of magical realism and a compassion that gives voice to the voiceless.

Along with the many unscrupulous people Io Capitano's young hero Seydou (Seydou Sarr) and his friend Moussa (Moustapha Fall) meet during their travels from their hometown in Senegal to an uncertain fate on the edge of Europe, there are more surreal figures as well – such as, in one of the film's signature images, a woman who floats in mid-air. Elements of dream, myth and fantasy continually intrude on what might otherwise seem like a hard-nosed portrayal of the ordeals faced by migrants on their journeys across Africa and into the treacherous waters beyond the continent's northern coast.

In part, this slippage is indicative of its protagonist's youthful perspective. Part of a lively, happy household, Seydou is presented as an upbeat but

naïve teenager, who's all too susceptible to his buddy's big talk about the more exciting life that awaits the duo in Europe, a mirage promoted by the media images they consume on their phones. They're motivated not by deprivation, but by a lust for adventure, a distinction that the film emphasises with its references to the questing heroes of Homer.

But the film's slides between naturalistic and fantastical modes are emblematic of the conflicting predilections of Io Capitano's director, too. Compared to the more reliably flamboyant ways of his Italian compatriots and fellow festival mainstays Luca Guadagnino and Paolo Sorrentino, Matteo Garrone has often demonstrated a steelier sensibility and a keen interest in the brute mechanics of the systems that entrap his characters, like the crime syndicate portrayed in his Cannes prizewinner Gomorrah (2008). He revisited that milieu with the brutal demi-monde of Dogman (2018), and here finds another analogue in the shadow world into which his two innocents descend, a perilous realm filled with counterfeit-passport suppliers, utterly indifferent desert guides, bribe-seeking policemen and vicious gangsters. It all constitutes a wider apparatus that operates with the same well-honed efficiency and according to the same merciless code deployed by the Camorra in Gomorrah; that's especially true of the torture rooms awaiting the least fortunate travellers in a makeshift prison in Libya.

But as Garrone revealed in Tale of Tales (2015), his alternately fanciful and grisly adaptation of stories by Giambattista Basile, and his 2019 version of Pinocchio, the filmmaker is hardly averse to more florid and ostentatious gestures. An early scene in which Seydou drums for an ecstatic dance

performance by his mother and sisters foreshadows a series of similarly heightened moments, along with several detours into fairytale-like fantasy and magic realism.

This combination of approaches can sometimes be jarring. But it does allow *Io Capitano* to diverge from the more earnest and predictable tone prevalent among recent films about the migrant experience. Moreover, with its greater focus on the journey rather than the destination (and the difficulties faced there), Garrone's film is more closely akin to predecessors such as Boris Lojkine's *Hope* (2014) than it is to Jonas Carpignano's *Mediterranea* (2015) and Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne's *Tori and Lokita* (2022).

Sadly, the above list illustrates how the global cinema marketplace typically devotes more resources and attention to white European directors who tackle African subjects than it does to equivalents by African or African diasporan filmmakers. It was no surprise to see Garrone's more comfortably middlebrow effort advance much further in the Oscar race in the International Feature category than bolder hopefuls such as C.J. Obasi's *Mami Wata* and Ramata-Toulaye Sy's *Banel & Adama* (both 2023).

But *Io Capitano* still bustles with energy and vivid details drawn from Garrone's research and the real-life experiences of former migrants, many of whom worked on set alongside the director. The episodic, road-movie structure often works in its favour, allowing for continual shifts in tone as nightmares like the boys' desert ordeal give way to gentler passages. In the most beguiling scene, Seydou enjoys a respite from his sufferings alongside a fatherly protector played by the great Burkinabé actor Issaka Sawadogo.

The film is also rescued from its more precious and sentimental excesses by the power and complexity of Sarr's central performance. Demonstrating the young character's resilience in the face of ever-worsening horrors, he ensures Seydou becomes something other than an emblem of a global crisis. Instead, he's utterly compelling as a youngster who must find a means to rebuild himself and persist, all while contending with the awful knowledge of how reckless and foolish his quest turned out to be.

*Jason Anderson,
Sight and Sound, 5 April 2024*