

TIME

An Honest Look at Illegal Immigration

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There is a hellish scene in the new Colombian film *Paraiso Travel* that should be watched by any American who has ever hired illegal immigrants —and, for that matter, any American who has ever shouted for their deportation. A group of weary Colombian migrants, having waded across a rushing river from Guatemala to Mexico, is violently set upon by the Maras, bloodthirsty gangbangers who prowl that border corridor. Men are shot, women are raped, children are terrorized. It's an almost daily occurrence of migrant life in this hemisphere, and the film captures it with haunting authenticity.

What's almost as disturbing is that few if any good films have ever captured it until now. Latin America's poorly financed movie industry can be as erratic as the region's governments; but the infrequent hits are always worth the wait, and that's certainly true of *Paraiso Travel*, which opened last month in Bogota and is setting Colombian box-office records before it heads to New York's Tribeca

film festival next month. Like other memorable Latin films of this decade, including Mexico's *Amores Perros* and Brazil's *City of God*, *Paraiso Travel* is as richly crafted as a fine *Day of the Dead* altar. But for *Yanquis*, this tale of a Medellin couple's harrowing odyssey to the U.S., and their hard but often humorous struggle in New York, packs a welcome bonus in the midst of a presidential race: a thoughtful, non-politicized take on America's immigration mess.

Immigration cranks like Lou Dobbs, but also the immigration advocates he lambastes, would do well to stop the cable cacophony for a couple hours and see this movie when it hits U.S. screens. "I wanted to make a film that makes Latin Americans think twice about traveling to the U.S. illegally," says its Colombian-born director, Simon Brand, "but one that also makes Americans think twice about how these people are treated once they get here." He scores on both counts. Adapted from the novel by Colombian author Jorge Franco, *Paraiso Travel* (*paraiso* is Spanish for "paradise") makes you consider the darker consequences of open borders and closed minds alike. The former lure indocumentados into risking their lives getting here and straining the social infrastructure once they do; the latter cause xenophobes to ignore the causes of illegal immigration — the deep poverty down there and the deep demand for cheap labor up here — and block the necessary and reasonable proposals for managing it (a la last summer's immigration reform debacle).

Not that *Paraiso Travel* doesn't also depict the uplifting immigrant success stories and the broad economic benefits the U.S. derives from its underground workforce. But what distinguishes the film is its entrancing, flesh-and-blood glimpse into the quirky, angst-ridden workings of the indocumentado world: heated kitchen-table debates back home, demeaning labor cattle calls and desperate housing improvisations in the U.S. (including makeshift rooms over loud, 24-hour racquetball courts in Queens). It's a milieu ripe with characters like a stuttering S&M photographer played with delightful understatement by Golden Globe nominee John Leguizamo (*To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything, Julie Newmar*); and a gorgeous street vendor and aspiring salsa singer played by Ana de la Reguera (Jack Black's heartthrob in *Nacho Libre*).

Leguizamo and De la Reguera are the film's only Hollywood stars, and they deliver stellar supporting performances. But Brand gets

superb portrayals from his Colombian leads: Angelica Bandon as the teen sexpot Reina; and Aldemar Correa, whom Brand calls "the next Gael Garcia Bernal," as her bewildered boyfriend Marlon. Bandon and Correa, who were discovered in Medellin's theater scene, play lower-middle-class kids driven less by economic straits than by a gratuitous belief that even the worst of the U.S. is preferable to the best their own country can give them. Sitting in a dank, cubicle-size hostel room after arriving in New York, a skeptical Marlon reminds Reina that even America has "sh--." Her response: yeah, but it's "gringo sh--." She may sound naive — but she's also a reminder of how Latin America's ineffectual governments continue to drive away even those citizens who seem to be living semi-comfortably in their homelands.

In lieu of U.S. tourist visas, which post-9/11 are increasingly difficult to get, Reina convinces Marlon — using sexual seduction powers that make Salome seem like a nun — that they should pay a Medellin travel agency, Paraiso Travel, \$3,000 for what could be called the illegal alien package. It's a flight to Panama and then a Dantean journey by bus and foot to the U.S., through squalid hotels and scorching deserts — including nightmarish hours hidden by smugglers in a truckload of suffocating, hollowed-out logs. Paraiso Travel's screenwriters, Franco and Juan Rendon, interviewed a number of real migrants who have made the journey. "I'm fortunate to live in the U.S. legally," says producer Santiago Diaz, a Bogota native, "but we all know people living here illegally, and their story should be told. We made this film for them."

It will also do a lot for Colombian cinema, which came of age in 2004 with the Oscar-nominated, Colombian-U.S. production, *Maria Full of Grace*, and looks set to join Mexico, Brazil and Argentina as Latin American countries with bona fide industries. All have been aided in recent years by new government financing and generous tax breaks for businesses that invest in film — sources that made up almost a quarter of Paraiso Travel's \$4.7 million cost. The movie takes the Colombian boom up a notch, into the realm of films like *City of God* that Latin American critics are calling *la buena onda* — a more consistent "groove" of first-rate moviemaking that showcases a distinctive Latin feel, a documentary-style realism splashed with artful devices like hopscotch flashbacks and colorfully detailed shots. "These are films that more genuinely reflect Latin American culture," says Diaz.

Most of *Paraiso Travel* is set in America, where Reina and Marlon discover that the awful crossing they've just finished was only the beginning of their odyssey, as migrants and as a couple. To the boy, in fact, Reina morphs into a metaphor for America itself: Is she — is it — really worth the trials he's suffering? When the two become separated, his search for her is conflated with the larger question. And perhaps another: Is our immigration dysfunction really worth the human pain it causes migrants and the political pain it causes us?