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Los Angeles: Berlin Review

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Yvette Cruz
Donaciano Bautista Matias
and Mateo Bautista Matias
in "Los Angeles"

The Bottom Line

Earnest intentions and ethnographic trappings aside, this is basically “Muchachos n the Hood.”

Venue

Berlin Film Festival (Forum)

Cast

Mateo Bautista Matias, Marcos Rodriguez Ruiz, Lidia Garcia, Daniel Bautista, Donaciano Bautista Matias, Valentina Ojeda

Director-screenwriter

Damian John Harper

Atmospherically set in a Zapotec village in southern Mexico, Damian John Harper’s debut centers on a 17-year-old preparing to plunge into gang culture.

Exploring the tragic conflict between traditional community life in rural southern Mexico and the far-reaching tentacles of gang violence, *Los Angeles* is an absorbing if familiar drama from first-time writer-director **Damian John Harper**. Following the model of Italian neorealism, locals play versions of themselves in this heartfelt story of migration as experienced by those who stay behind. But despite the specificity of its Oaxaca

setting, the German-produced film evokes too many minor variations on similar themes, without hitting enough new notes.

An American anthropology major, Harper spent a year working as an ethnologist in the Zapotec village of Santa Ana del Vale, observing the ebb and flow of life as sons, brothers and fathers undertook the dangerous illegal journey across the border into the U.S. to earn money their families needed to survive. The authenticity he brings to the milieu is admirable, as is the purity of having non-professional actors dramatize their own lives – even if that's also a limitation when the emotional stakes are raised.

Shot by **Friede Clausz** with an agile handheld camera that gets in close to the characters, the film establishes a gritty texture from the outset as a vicious beating is heard beneath the opening credits. The recipient is 17-year-old Mateo (**Mateo Bautista Matias**), who's being indoctrinated into the brutal gang-banger ethos by the village thugs. Having spent time up north, these guys have come back versed in violence, drugs and even language and music that mark them as foreigners among an ethnic minority in which interconnectedness of both family and community is a key value.

Mateo is convinced that becoming a badass gang member will be his ticket to survival and prosperity when he heads for Los Angeles to support his family.

Woven seamlessly into the dramatic fabric, the film considers distinct types of emigrant. There's Mateo's unseen father, who has stopped sending cash and may be shackled up with a new family in California. The boy's godfather Marcos (**Marcos Rodriguez Ruiz**), on the other hand, worked an honest job and has returned with a strong sense of civic pride as well as a touch of self-importance. Danny (**Daniel Bautista**), who is involved with Marcos' daughter, has absorbed the worst of gang culture, making him an undesirable addition to the family. Another absentee, Lino, has been alienated in L.A. after trying to extricate himself from a gang, putting his life in danger and causing sorrow to his mother (**Lidia Garcia**).

Her vehemently literal "it-takes-a-village" speech as she vents her bitterness at the local gang is an overstated misstep in a drama that strives for verisimilitude. But otherwise one of the movie's particular strengths is its casual observation of different generations of women and their interaction with men.

Patriarchal figureheads like Mateo's grandfather make the major family decisions, for better or worse, while the women are usually the ones making the biggest compromises. The loyalties of Marcos' daughter, and to a certain extent, even his wife have shifted to Danny in ways that make the returned family figurehead apprehensive and angry. By contrast, Mateo's shy romance with his neighbor (**Valentina Ojeda**) shows the sweet girl's wariness when she realizes the direction his life is taking. Harper draws the climate of fear weighed against pragmatic reality quite well.

While the performances are at times a little stiff, the central figure of Mateo gives the film a nice balance of seriousness and softness. He's torn between the toughening process of his gang initiation and affection for the home and way of life that he's preparing to leave, as soon as he can raise the \$10,000 fee to pay a "coyote" for his border passage.

Some of Harper's plotting feels forced, especially as Mateo's kid brother (**Donaciano Bautista Matias**) risks being snared in the fallout of his actions. But the real reason the film remains somewhat underpowered despite the very real dangers faced by its characters is that its story has been told so many times before. The lovingly detailed depiction of a place and its people keeps it watchable. But at heart, this tale of a good

kid having second thoughts about crossing over to the bad side isn't original enough to pack much punch.

Venue: Berlin Film Festival (Forum)

Production company: Weydemann Bros., Cine Plus, ZDF Das Kleine Fernsehspiel

Cast: Mateo Bautista Matias, Marcos Rodriguez Ruiz, Lidia Garcia, Daniel Bautista, Donaciano Bautista Matias, Valentina Ojeda

Director-screenwriter: Damian John Harper

Producers: Jonas Weydemann, Jakob D. Weydemann

Director of photography: Friede Clausz

Production designer: Adan Hernandez

Music: Gregor Bonse

Costume designers: Abril Alamo, Felicitas Adler

Editor: Lorna Hoefler-Steffen

Sales: Picture Tree International

No rating, 100 minutes

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