

'Epicentro': Film Review | Sundance 2020

6:36 PM PST 2/2/2020 by Leslie Felperin



Courtesy of Sundance

THE BOTTOM LINE

As aromatic as a fine cohiba cigar. [🐦](#)

Hubert Sauper ('Darwin's Nightmare') visits Cuba, the place where it all kicked off and still does, in this discursive documentary, a prizewinner at Sundance.

A country almost too photogenic for its own good, Cuba has starred in more features, particularly documentaries, than might seem strictly proportional to its size, GDP or geopolitical influence. But then again, to repurpose an old Winston Churchill witticism, it's a nation that produces far more history than it can consume locally.

Acclaimed nonfiction filmmaker Hubert Sauper turns his rigorous but compassionate gaze on this fascinating place in *Epicentro*, winner of the World Cinema Grand Jury Prize for documentary at the 2020 edition of Sundance. A more joyful than usual sojourn for Sauper, whose stringent but sometimes grueling features (*Darwin's Nightmare*, *We Come as Friends*) tend to focus on the ravages of capitalism, post-colonialism and war, this mostly cheery work meets some likable locals.

Impoverished but neither broken nor bowed — despite the Trump administration's recent efforts to make them suffer economically — the Cuban subjects come across as resourceful, wised-up survivors, still proud to be living in one of the last communist countries in the world, even if you have to watch what you say around the cops.

The real stars of the show are two cheeky prepubescent girls, Leonelis Arango Salas and Annielys Pelladito Zaldivar, who explain with a little prompting from the offscreen Sauper that they're making a film together about "foreign interference and slavery and about people in the street," which pretty much hits the mark.

Through interactions with these two and many other kids — the "little prophets" as Sauper calls them in the end credits — a cinematic essay is built up in layers that engages with, among many other things: Columbus' first landing on Cuba as the dawn of colonialism; the birth of utopianism at the very same time the New World was discovered; the legacy of the Spanish-American War and Teddy Roosevelt's imperialist ambitions for the island; how the earliest documentaries at the dawn of cinema were also the first works of cinematic propaganda; and the long shadow of modern Cuba's founding fathers, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, whose own reputations are not untainted by propagandistic distortion.

That's just for starters, in a film that weaves together vérité footage with voiceover philosophizing from Sauper himself and clips from an assortment of archive footage. In another filmmaker's hands, this might have become a message-heavy morass, but Sauper and his co-editor, veteran Yves Deschamps (Bruno Dumont's *The Life of Jesus*, the 2018 restoration of Orson Welles' *The Other Side of the Wind*) work the material with a remarkable fluidity and gracefulness that's consistently engaging and surprising.

Working as his own cinematographer as usual, Sauper and his minimalist crew succeed in getting close enough to the subjects to feel more like collaborators than interviewers. Or even co-conspirators, given that one late sequence sees Sauper posing as the girls' guardian to help get them into a fancy hotel meant for tourists so they can enjoy the swimming pool.

At moments, the assemblage might verge on becoming too airy and loosey-goosey, losing the thematic thread a bit amidst all the colorful vintage automobiles and the usual picturesque poverty shots characteristic of so many Cuba documentaries. Naturally, there are salty old dogs smoking massive cigars and dancing with beautiful younger women, and lots of singing and playing in the

streets from assorted folks, killing time in a country whose image is defined in part by its sleepy sensuality. (A few prostitutes have a chat with Sauper's camera.)

It's never quite clear what the actor Oona Castilla Chaplin (*Game of Thrones*) daughter of Geraldine Chaplin and granddaughter of

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Like the impressive waves we see encroaching on the island throughout, the film comes in crests and ebbs, and feels like it could have gone on for hours more or just as easily been a short.



Venue: Sundance Film Festival (World Cinema Documentary Competition)

Production: A Groype Deux, KGP Filmproduktion, Little Magnet Films

Cast: Hubert Sauper, Oona Castilla Chaplin, Leonelis Arango Salas, Annielys Pelladito Zaldivar, Yorlenis David de la Cruz Leyva, Clarita Sanchez, Feña LeChuck, Juan Padron, Felix Beaton, Menale Kaza, Hans Helmut Ludwig, Deneli Beatriz de la Cruz, Leiva Yailen, Leiva Ortiz, Kirenia Sanchez

Director/screenwriter/cinematographer: Hubert Sauper, based on the book Energie und Utopie by Johannes Schmid

Producers: Martin Marquet, Daniel Marquet, Gabriele Kranzelbinder, Paolo Calamita

Executive producers: Dan Cogan, Michael Donaldson, Jenny Raskin, Agnes Mentre

Music: Zsuzsanna Varkonyi, Maximilian 'Twig' Turnbull

Editors: Yves Deschamps, Hubert Sauper

Sound designer: Karim Weth

Sales: Wild Bunch, CAA

109 minutes

'Safety': Film Review

1:38 PM PST 12/9/2020 by John DeFore





Disney Enterprises, Inc.

THE BOTTOM LINE

A blandly likable account of impressive stick-to-itiveness. [🐦](#)

12/11/2020

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Reginald Hudlin adapts the true story of a college athlete struggling to care for his young brother without losing his scholarship.

A scholarship football player carries more weight than any college student should have to in *Safety*, Reginald Hudlin's adaptation of the true story of Clemson freshman Ray McElrathbey: While attempting to make the cut on the field and surpass expectations in class, he has to take custody of an 11-year-old brother after his single mom enters rehab. The movie bites off a lot as well, filling its two-hour running time with a story that might've stood a better chance of moving us if it had been developed as a more sober and more character-focused miniseries. As it is, the family pic's light tone never lets its themes of addiction, abandonment and poverty hit home, instead focusing on its hero's unlikely accomplishment and the brotherhood of sport.

Jay Reeves plays McElrathbey, whose arrival at Clemson's South Carolina campus looks less exciting than most first semesters away from home: Ray's so wiped out by 5:30 a.m. practices and playbook cramming, he almost doesn't manage to get his textbooks in

time to start classes. The bookstore employee who saves his skin there, Corinne Foxx's Kaycee, might as well have a neon sign around her neck screaming "future girlfriend": Not only is she generous and pretty, but she's also a fangirl studying to be a sports journalist. (The film's so confident we understand the solidity of their just-add-water relationship that it never bothers to show the two kissing.)

Ray's kid brother, Fahmarr (Thaddeus J. Mixson), whom he calls Fay, has been sending a stream of texts that Ray mostly ignores. But when he realizes their mother (Amanda Warren) has been locked up for possession of drugs, Ray races home to Atlanta and winds up taking temporary custody of the kid. (There's a very fraught scene with a man who's been looking out for Fay, who seems to represent dangers the family continues to face, but the character is never mentioned again.)

Back on campus, it's all perky music and inept high jinks. Ray will be kicked out of the dorm if he's caught with a guest, so he and his Noo Yawk-raised roomie/teammate try to keep Fay a secret. They haul him to the bathroom and back in a duffel bag; they make flimsy excuses for the not-insubstantial noise the kid makes. But Fay's a handful, and "keep a low profile" means nothing to him. (Mixson's performance is lively and believable, but Nick Santora's screenplay doesn't give him memorable opportunities to make us laugh.)

With too many jobs to do, Ray is failing at all of them. At almost the dead center of the film, the script places him and Fay at a literal crossroads: Our hero doubles down on his commitment to his brother, embraces the help of his teammates and good-guy coaches, and suddenly everything looks much easier than it could possibly have been.

The film breezes through this transition because it has another obstacle ahead — one it hasn't prepared us for at all, and doesn't have the time to do justice to. In order to meet all his responsibilities, Ray wound up pursuing a waiver of NCAA rules barring student athletes from taking certain kinds of assistance from others. In real life, this was surely another giant headache for a young man who didn't need it. But here, it's treated like a form of persecution — curse you, you ethics-sticklers! — whose main function is to set up a big Capraesque scene that allows the Clemson community to be the supportive family Ray and Fay have never had.

Distributor: Disney+

Production companies: Select Films, Mayhem Pictures

Cast: Jay Reeves, Thaddeus J. Mixson, Corinne Foxx, James Badge Dale, Matthew Glave, Hunter Sansone, Amanda Warren, Miles Burris, Isaac Bell, Elijah Bell

Director: Reginald Hudlin

Screenwriter: Nick Santora

Producers: Mark Ciardi, Gordon Gray

Executive producers: Douglas S. Jones, Campbell McClinnis

Director of photography: Shane Hurlbut

Production designer: Richard Hoover

Editor: Terel Gibson

Composer: Marcus Miller

Rated PG, 119 minutes

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