



Movies are made at night

Bruno de Almeida was once a Portuguese in New York, now he's a New Yorker in Lisbon. In The Lovebirds the city steps into his movies for the first time. It's a nocturnal feature film. And the most spontaneous work of a truly independent filmmaker

By Kathleen Gomes, ÍPSILON, March 13, 2008

The train to Oporto is leaving in three minutes. Bruno de Almeida has just found out that he's not allowed to smoke on board.

- "I'm not going."

The Italian movies that he greatly admires, particularly Fellini's, are full of incidents like this: a man out of control, followed by a human parade that tries its best to quiet him down. The character's outburst isn't always what it seems. More often than not, it's less a reaction to the tragedy that has just struck than an actual attempt to test the human shield around him.

The station clock speeds by but Bruno is still not setting a foot inside the train. The plan - to follow him to Fantasporto, an international film festival in the north of Portugal that is showing "The Lovebirds" tonight - may end before it begins.

- "Three hours without smoking? I can't do it. I'm not going."

Three of the movie's actors that are travelling with Bruno try to convince him otherwise. They soon give up on common sense - only humor will put him on the train. That and Barack Obama, which at this moment is also something to laugh about: "Don't forget to make your contribution to the campaign", Bruno tells the uniformed train attendant standing at the wagon door.



The trip to Oporto coincides with the day that Bruno's face is printed on Publico's front page, inside a (fake) Obama electoral badge. The newspaper is running a story on Bruno's heartfelt support of the Democrat candidate. Bruno de Almeida, a Portuguese who lived in New York for 22 years, believes that Obama is going to change the world, although right now it just looks like he wants to have fun, by becoming an evangelist caricature of himself. New Yorker John Frey, Lovebirds actor and co-writer, produces an Oporto guidebook borrowed from a friend, and smiles. "It's got all the places where we can smoke."

The train is leaving and Bruno is on board. He refers to New York in the past tense, not because it's been two years since he returned to Lisbon but because the city isn't what it used to be. He was there when Rudolph Giuliani was mayor and you couldn't light a cigarette outside a New York café when the ban on smoking in public places was still unheard of in Europe. Giuliani cleansed New York in other ways: he eradicated Times Square's bad reputation, ridding it of prostitutes and low-lives, making it respectable and, as they say in De Almeida's first feature film, On the run (1999), the safest place in Manhattan.

"New York is the city where I lived the longest, where I fell in love more often. I know it better than Lisbon [his hometown]. It used to be a highly creative place, where the bohemian artist ruled as king of the city. I remember arriving in 1985, and the first thing I saw was a subway train with a huge Lee Quiñones' graffiti. A freshly painted train that lasted for a few hours...! That idea of city art... Man, it was everywhere - music got out on the street, Keith Haring was painting the walls. I used to spot Haring when I went out at night. And Basquiat, John Lurie, John Zorn... All that so-called Lower East Side scene which is now well gone. I was lucky to have been there."

Lisbon, after New York

Having arrived in New York as a musician, he returned to Lisbon as a filmmaker. To put it briefly: the art scene of the 1980s seduced him and he followed; after reading Marcel Duchamp like it was the Holy Gospel, he started believing in ready-mades instead of musical notes. He found out about Jonas Mekas' experimental filmmaking, and Cassavetes. "I went to the movies every night. You had a real film culture going on in neighbourhood cinemas, that was before video."

That New York doesn't exist anymore. "It is no longer a place where artists can live and work because it's too expensive. And there's nothing really new going on." A lot of people moved to Berlin or Seattle. "New York used to be the place where everybody was eccentric, flamboyant, and all of a sudden everything seems banal. If I manage to find another city that has that... I think Lisbon has it, I feel a creative energy. But you have to come up with your own scene. New York wasn't like that - it was happening and you'd get caught in it almost immediately."

Lisbon appears in Bruno's movies for the first time in The Lovebirds: six stories that run simultaneously. laced with wandering and a defined geography - a nocturnal, ancient Lisbon - that represents resilience. That's why The Lovebirds digs deep, shows the ruin, evokes earthquakes: its purpose is to say, "We're still here".

"I'm sort of in love with the city. I don't like Lisbon that much during the day. But it has its own nightlife." The Lovebirds lasts as long as one night: it begins at the end of the day and stops at dawn. That's also Bruno daily schedule. Twenty years sleeping in another time zone isn't a habit one loses lightly. Moreover, he's not through with New York yet (no man owns an unlimited Sinatra CD collection for no reason): his production company, Arco Films, founded in 1990, is still based there, he still pays taxes and, of course, his friends are there.

We can't believe our ears: "Lisbon is a city that doesn't sleep, much more so than New York. It's deserted at night, but it has spots of activity." Movies are made at night, he says. The night shift makes it easier to find Lisbon's specifics. "Cab drivers, hookers, doormen, police officers, drag queens, drunks. The Lisbon nightlife is the Lisbon nightlife, you can't find it elsewhere. I like to be in touch with that world. I once met a taxi driver, the grumpy type, who only worked at night, and I asked him why. He said, 'I like to breathe people's minds while they're sleeping.'"

The real indie

The night is a vampire, but right now a camera would come in handy, even though it's still daytime. Rebelliousness has its charms and Bruno is profiting from it: he'll get to smoke his cigarettes before arriving in Oporto. Half an hour on a train and he's already the most popular guy on board, a fearsome gadabout who engages swift approbation from people he just met. Don't ask how: he's the unmanageable type, with a daunting lack of propriety. Half an hour on a train and he already danced in the bar wagon; tried to bribe the train staff to let him smoke ("What if I pay you one Euro?", he asks); he's been improper; and got what he wanted (and even what he couldn't imagine). A shy person will either welcome or dread him, for the same reason - although in self-defence he claims himself to be timid. Bruno crosses the line, he's the first to break the rules, and that's why he goes where no shy could - the driver's cabin. And reality goes beyond fiction. The train operator recalls how in ten years of work he's come across six railroad suicides. "How does it feel?", asks Ana Padrão, who stars in The Lovebirds.

"There's a common saying among us, the first one is the worst. But they're all pretty much tough to deal with."

Bruno de Almeida is starting to realize that this would make a movie, most of all Italian. "I Vitelloni!!!!!!", he screams through the cab's porthole, referring to Fellini's movie about a generation of arrested development, his own. And that ticket collector next to him, randy and toothless, could be a character from one of Dino Risi's movies, a personal favourite. Bruno, who is delighted, offers the man a role in his next film. Later that night, in Oporto, he assures: "Mark my words, sometime soon you'll see him in a movie of mine. But I can't pay him."

De Almeida didn't pay the two Sopranos who worked in The Lovebirds, Michael Imperioli and John Ventimiglia, a symptom of his system of production's feebleness. The Lovebirds is an independent movie and for once that doesn't turn out to be a repository of trademarks asserting a supposed indie style. In Bruno de Almeida's case, being indie still means the real thing. Little money and a lot of determination. Artistic independence and a solid family of actors willing to go places.

"It's easy to shoot a movie. All it takes is a camera, some friends, a script", he says. The Lovebirds is the outcome of a commission by the Lisbon Village Festival: Bruno got 80.000 Euros, "the equivalent to a short film budget", and he did a feature instead.

The Portuguese director Fernando Lopes, a cinematic father figure to Bruno ("my mentor", he declares) who features in The Lovebirds, says that he greatly admires the way the movie got made. One of the country's New Cinema imposing figures during the sixties, Lopes speaks of the Nouvelle Vague and of revolution because to him this proves that there's hope for filmmaking outside the State financing system. It took "an alien" to do that, which is how he views Bruno - someone outside the usual mindset of Portuguese cinema. Lopes is so impressed that he plans to shoot his next documentary the same way, with Bruno's contribution.



He believes there's a certain American pragmatism to De Almeida's approach. The director of Lovebirds states that the European film financing system, which relies on government funding, is an enviable luxury compared to the independent cinema in the U.S. "An American independent filmmaker has no subsidy, no backing - nothing." In Europe, he says, "everything is more or less independent." But the lack of financial support "should not be an excuse for not shooting", says Bruno. "If waiting for the money means five years without shooting, I'd rather shoot. And I'm lucky enough to have a group of actors that think the same way. Cassavetes is a shared inspiration. We're living in times in which everything is available: cheap cameras, movie downloads... When I started out the Internet didn't exist, nor digital tape. You'd shoot with film, it was harder back then. It's ridiculous to make movies like they did in the 1950s. We had Godard, we had Cassavetes... I'm sure that if Cassavetes was alive, he'd be shooting in digital."

After the punch

Bruno de Almeida is back in Fantasporto, after showing his first short here, in 1993. "I was here fifteen years ago, my first film festival." The Debt was a black-and-white film, under the influence - of Cassavetes and B-movies - that struck a rising career. It won the best short film prize at the Critic's Week in Cannes, and was shown in 85 festivals. It was enough to raise high expectations about his debut in a feature film, that turned out to be gruelling and only materialized in 1999, with On the Run. Two buddies, two opposites attracted that wander through the New York night. You could already notice in it a certain penchant for vignettes, for miniature stories, although it felt like a constrained movie, in which Bruno seems more worried in fulfilling a new-yorkish style. It was a movie done by a Portuguese and it was easy to forget that. It was also somewhat out-of-time - the equivalent to a warm hug in the post-Tarantino era, where films weren't like that anymore.

If nowadays he insists on keeping himself far from the film industry, it's mostly because of what happened while making On the Run. "Production took over the artistic side, I was forced to make choices I didn't want to do, and the movie was reedited by the producer. Twenty-six cuts, they took it away from me. I made a movie which I don't totally identify with."

He had already decided he wasn't looking back when digital became utterly available as a tool. It helped him bury what was left of the industry-as-possibility. And start a second coming. To begin with, he already had a family, a tight connection of partners in crime that went back to On the Run: Imperioli, Ventimiglia, John Frey, Drena De Niro, Nick Sandow. They all reappear in The Lovebirds. They're the same group of people that stand behind The Collection, a series of short stories shot in New York between 2001 and 2005. With no imperative other than an exploratory approach, they filmed without schedule, on weekends. Once they were finished, the films became available on the Internet, which allowed for immediate feedback. "A distribution utopia, if you like", says Bruno. A liberating gesture: that is what you think of after watching the full 24 short stories. That, and the way they look at the city. When The Collection was concluded, a friend told Bruno: "This is your farewell movie to New York." "She realized what I hadn't yet realized", says the 43 year-old director.

It seems rather unlikely that The Lovebirds would exist without The Collection. There's a certain view, common to both of them, that for lack of a better word we will define as nostalgic (or elegiac). Bruno explains it better than anyone else: it is a look simultaneously from the inside and the outside, in the same way that he would never have done a documentary about Fado singer Amália Rodrigues if he hadn't been in New York at the time. The Lovebirds emerges as his most genuine movie, or at least the most free - documentaries aside -, as if he had come full circle. He did it in more than one way: The Lovebirds earned him the Jury Prize at Fantasporto, his first film festival ever.

In the movie, Fernando Lopes plays a filmmaker who's shooting his last picture. The movie set is a boxing ring, a fitting pretext for analogies between filmmaking and fighting. In one of its deeper scenes, an exchange between Lopes and his ever-winning boxer that Bruno describes as "the backbone of the film", we're told that "there is a sad beauty in defeat".

"Without that scene, there would be no film". Lopes says that thing, that he's entitled to say because he knows about having been knocked down. As a filmmaker you must have earned the right to talk about certain things. I don't believe anyone can talk about what he or she doesn't understand. Naturally, you can do a gangster scene, that's easy-going: anybody can film two guns, there's nothing to it. Whereas a scene between two people, where you talk about something that's real... You have to earn the right to do it. I think I can also say that - I probably couldn't 15 years ago. I've also been knocked down." But it wasn't a K.O.