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THE SHIP OF DEATH

Partly made in Ghana maritime, the reviewer observes how the Screenplay, DEADLY VOYAGE fared on British television and in the British press.

Shown on BBC 1 Deadly Voyage received the kind of publicity and attention from reviewers that its price-tag demanded. One can guess where part of the money went. Some of the cast are pretty costly: Joss Ackland’s whisky captain can’t have come cheap, and from his Vlachos, a sort of Greek Poirot, David Suchet must have named a high price. Omar Epps, as Kingsley Ofosu stowaway on the run, and Sean Pertwee, as Lon the Machiavellian first mate in pursuit, (both outstanding) are rising stars with their own growing bands of followers - and, I am sure, their own razor-sharp agents.

The Guardian claimed to have broken the story of the Ghanaian stowaways murdered by Ukrainian sailors on the MS Ruby and tossed into the sea off Portugal during 1992. Indeed on Friday 11 October the paper proclaimed that ‘Journalist Nick Davies uncovered the terrible story of murder on which Deadly Voyage is based.’ But the film

HE current contrasts on British TV are striking. Rhodes, twelve years in the making, ten episodes, numerous shorts that include hundreds of impis or miners, turn of the century South Africa and Lobengula’s kraal lovingly reconstructed, two books as major spin offs, and a budget, according to the British press, of £10 million.

Deadly Voyage, based on events that led to a trial in Rouen during December 1995, a one and a half hour ‘film for Saturday evening TV,’ with some early crowd scenes and thereafter a small - indeed a diminishing - cast locked in a ship, made on a budget, it seems, of £4 million.

James Gibbs

African Quarterly on the Arts
Vol. 2 No. 1

GLENDORA
Indeed on Friday 11 October proclaimed that 'Journalist Nick Davies uncovered the terrible story of murder on which Deadly Voyage is based.' But the film indicates that Kingsley Ofosu, the only one of Ghanaians to survive the 'Ship of Death,' 'uncovered' the story himself after jumping ship in Le Havre. Attempts to claim exclusive rights to the tale should be resisted!

Kingsley Ofosu and the other dock workers who stowaway with him. In a style that occasionally uses broad gestures and exaggeration background is sketched in. Thus, for example, we learn about Kingsley Ofosu's circumstances as brother, dock worker, father-to-be and lottery winner. In the course of the first two thirds or so of the film there are brief opportunities to discover what the members of the group share, and in what ways they differ. We are shown the poverty and the sense of community of the Takoradi from which the young men seek to escape, and watch them loading the cocoa beans that reveal the rawness of the 'material' being exported.

All dream of escaping to the United States as to a Land of Opportunity, but particular aspirations vary and include becoming a nurse, a heavy-weight boxer, and a taxi driver. The group is presented as fairly ordinary, not without human weaknesses but with resources of dignity and courage.

Joss Ackland's character is developed in particular detail, as an honoured veteran of the Russian Navy, a grandfatherly figure, with a dependence on alcohol and a tendency to abdicate moral responsibility at key moments. Much of this emerged in scenes he shares with Vlachos, representative of a Greek shipping line and, within the structure of the film, of much else. Vlachos does not have a personal story to tell, indeed sometimes it seems his purpose on the ship is simply to represent capitalism and sustain dramatic tension. A potential nemesis, he inspires fear - or at least caution - in the murderous crew. His presence among Russian and Ukrainians also, conveniently, makes it credible that English might be used for key exchanges.

Some of the members of the crew are touched by compassion and human feelings, others have been brutalized by the system and have been hardened against appeals to their humanity by racism. They are 'poor bastards' in...
many ways as abused by the system as the Ghanaians they massacre. Revealingly, they spend their idle moments in horseplay by the pool and in shooting water melons held by a companion. In the Ghanaians they massacre. Revealingly, they know how to play the skin card, and, when his part in the murder has been revealed, we hear Lon excusing his action to a French official by pleading: 'We were trying to do France a favour. We executed them.' Observations like this make the freighter both a mass of metal with many places to hide and a microcosm in which the hunters and the hunted have truly been set against one another. Outside forces have sent them conflicting messages, and the script never allows this to be forgotten.

Deadly Voyage was a co-production with BBC and HBO NYC backing and involved John Goldschmidt and Danny Glover. Directed by John Mackenzie, it received its World Premiere in the National Conference Centre, Accra, and was shown on British television at peak viewing time in the UK on 12 October. British reviewers sampled responded positively, and some showed an awareness of what the film was trying to achieve - and of what it had sacrificed in moving from docudrama to action movie, from Guardian story to Hollywood/prime-time package.

Omar Epps earned critics' praise for his performance as Ofosu - often referred to as 'Ofusu' and it was indeed a triumphant piece of acting - an entirely convincing portrayal of a Ghanaian by an American. However, Stuart Jeffries in a Guardian review described his role as 'underwritten.' In a feature article in the same publication, Bob Flynn made a similar point, quoting Ofosu as saying 'The film does not show what was in my head.' In the course of shaping for the screen and attracting funds, the balance had swung a long way away from the fugitive: he had no drinking companion to talk to, he was not seen being cross-examined by a policeman. It was his fate to sweat, bleed and cry as he struggled to survive.

Towards the end, Epps is faced with one daunting task after the other, but, sustained by courage, hope, God and thoughts of family, he manages to summon the will and the strength to elude his pursuers. To a distinguished score by John Scott, he climes up a ventilation shaft, sneaks across the ship's deck, climbs down an anchor chain, swims to the harbour wall, swarms up a ladder, and, pursued by crewmen, races through harbour buildings to find safety in arms of the French police - of all people. By this time, Epps is trapped and thoughts of family, he manages to summon the will and the strength to elude his pursuers.

The complaint about slickness is not likely to be shared by those in Ghana where film, video and television directors are struggling to raise production standards. There are, in any case, a few wrinkles in the film. These include some unconvincing dubbing when Vlachos arrives on the Ruby, a lack of...
continuity that makes the appearance of
the sailor's dog in the 'Hotel Delilah' very
surprising, the untidy storyline connected
with the Cameroonian stowaway, as
well as the sort of mumbled exchange
that confused the critic on the Telegraph.
For those interested in the develop-
ment of the Ghanaian film industry, it
was good to see the maturing of acting
talents. It was satisfying, for example,
to watch those with an established position
in the theatre, such as David Donoh, and
those who have had previous experience
in films, such as Henry Nartey, scale new
heights in challenging contexts. Two years
ago, the latter was not happy about the
way he was treated when acting in YTV's
docudrama about Sean Devereaux. I
hope that he negotiated satisfactory terms
this time.
Part of Ghana's legacy from the
Sixties is an infrastructure in the film
industry, and one hopes that an appro-
priate price was extracted from 'BBC
HVO' for the use of equipment, loca-
tions, and skills. The list of those thanked
at the end of the film included not only the
film corporation (GFIC), but also the
Ghana Army and the Black Star Line. By
now those negotiating contracts must
know the value of the assets they have to
make available, and the appropriate
bodies should have been paid in an
appropriate way - as well as thanked. If
they were properly paid, then a substan-
tial share of the £4 million must have
remained in Ghana, and some of the
injustices connected with the interna-
tional capitalist system exposed in Deadly
Voyage will have been challenged. GR

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