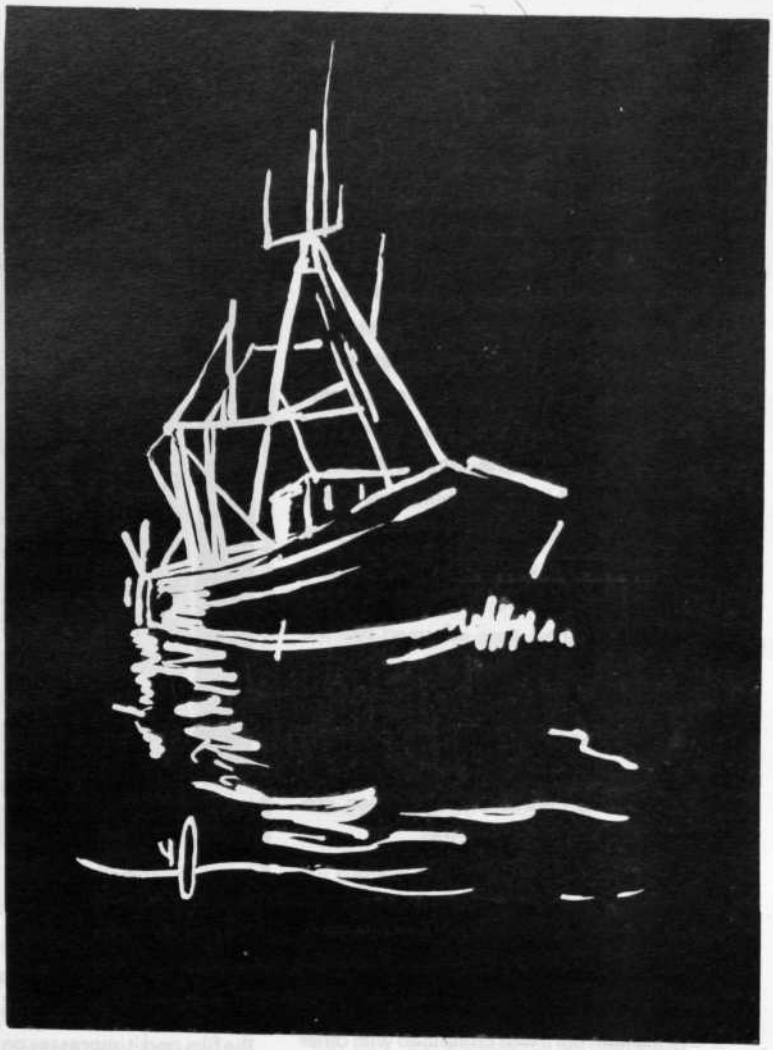

THE SHIP OF DEATH

James Gibbs

THE 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.

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

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!

To bring 'The Ship of Death' to the screen, expansion of 'Ofosu's Story' was inevitable. While the grit and determination, the improvisation and resourcefulness were Ofosu's, he was only part of what happened. The film's credits acknowledged his contribution - and that of Davies. However, in the course of the film, audiences were left in no doubt that other resources had been tapped, and, at the end, they were informed that the script had been developed with support from the European Script Fund and that the script-writer had drawn on his own research. We also read: 'some dialogue, events and characters have been created for dramatic purposes.'

Ofosu's story, and particularly the account of the four days and nights he spent on the run after his companions had been murdered and before the ship reached Le Havre, made the tense climax of the film, but it was combined with other people's stories. The film introduced Ofosu's Ghanaian companions, and explored the experiences, perhaps imagined, perhaps linked in some way with fact, of the ship's captain, of Vlachos, and of some members of the crew. Ships can easily be seen as microcosms, and there were senses in which script-writer Stuart Urban and director John Mackenzie used the M S Ruby to provide insights into the new world (dis)order, an arrangement that carries much 'cargo' from old world 'orders' and that offers little hope to many hundreds of millions on this planet.

The context for the presentation of what happened on the M S Ruby on the voyage from Takoradi to Le Havre was provided by an opening sequence set in New York which showed stowaways trying to escape from the ship. From that event and the discussion about it, we learn carrying stowaways may mean heavy fines for shipping lines - that these are only sometimes paid by insurance companies and that crews may be punished. Whether this is an accurate summary of the existing situation, I do not know, but it is the exposition provided for the film and it impresses on audiences the vulnerable position in which the Captain and crew of M S Ruby found themselves. It also emphasises the dangers of stowing away. Later in the film there are suggestions that stowaways might be allowed to 'work their passages' or pay their way - but these options are not considered seriously.

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Other factors that contributed to the vulnerability of the ship's crew were linked to the fragmentation of socialist republics and the rampant position of capitalism. It seems - the details are not made entirely clear - that, at least for the purposes of the film, following the fragmentation of the Soviet Union, M S Ruby, a Russian ship, became part of the Greek shipping empire, and that it was crewed by Ukrainians.

After the 'international context' has been established, the film moves to Takoradi. There the camera seeks out 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 a telling touch, one of the sailors is seen playing with the 'Gameboy' that a stowaway had carried on board. But, although they are underdogs like the Ghanaians, 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.

Matthew Bond shared with readers of The Times (14 October) his feeling that 'for a film based heavily on recent and real murders, it was just too slick, too exciting to be palatable.' Once again, this draws attention, I suspect, to the shift in genre from docudrama to action movie, that accompanied the importation of Hollywood money and glitz

Towards the end, Epps is faced with one daunting task after the another, 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 chimneys 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 stage, *Deadly Voyage* has become an *action movie* and it is not surprising to hear that the man himself was loudly applauded when the lights came up after the film in which he had been impersonated was screened in Ghana.

Even on the small screen, *Deadly Voyage* had tremendous power to move. Christina Odone reflected the experience of many when she wrote in the Daily Telegraph 'I have been wrung dry for ninety minutes of nail biting tension.' But it also confused. The same critic claimed that she heard that 'at $3 per hour (Ghanaians) were paid three times as much as the sailors.' What I think came across - in a crucial exchange that should have been clearer - was that, if the Ukrainians lost their jobs as sailors, they would be competing for work in the Ukraine where they could earn only one dollar a day. The idea that a Ghanaian worker could command a wage of $3 an hour shows just how out of touch *Telegraph* reviewers are and how 'selective' hearing is! I think the script has Ofosu indicating that there was sometimes work at $3 a day - 'but,' he adds, 'there's not always work.'

There were also those who 'could not admire it.' Matthew Bond shared with readers of *The Times* (14 October) his feeling that 'for a film based heavily on recent and real murders, it was just too slick, too exciting to be palatable.' Once again, this draws attention, I suspect, to the shift in genre from docudrama to action movie, that accompanied the importation of Hollywood money and glitz. The involvement of Danny Glover, described in *The Guardian*, as 'buddy co-star to Mel Gibson's madman in the three *Lethal Weapon* blockbusters,' hints at the genesis of support for the transformation, the Hollywoodization. But a certain passion, a sense of outrage at the system, remains and *Daily Voyage* is *Lethal Weapon*, or *Die Hard*, 'With Attitude.'

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 development 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 Dontoh, 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 appropriate price was extracted from 'BBC HVO' for the use of equipment, locations, 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 substantial share of the £4 million must have remained in Ghana, and some of the injustices connected with the international capitalist system exposed in *Deadly Voyage* will have been challenged. **GR**