

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2024/25 SEASON**



IO CAPITANO

(Language: Wolof, French, Arabic, English)

Director: Matteo Garrone

UK Release: 2024

Running time: 121 minutes

Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 16 October 2024

“Hope and fantasy coexist so closely in *Io Capitano*, Matteo Garrone’s wrenching Oscar-nominated account of the journey of two teenage Senegalese migrants towards a new life in Europe, that you start to wonder if the film is arguing that hope is a fantasy. Whether the better future that tempts 16-year-old Seydou (Seydou Sarr) and his cousin Moussa (Moustapha Fall) on to the perilous trip across the Sahara and the Mediterranean is no more substantial than the mirage of a floating woman that Seydou hallucinates in the desert. But in fact this is a film that, for all its brutal horrors, keeps a kernel of hope and faith in the inherent decency of humankind (or some of it at least).

Central to the spirit of the film is Seydou, a gangly string bean with a smile that warms the screen; a teenager who is still enough of a child to believe that manhood means never being afraid. It’s a gorgeous, sensitive performance from Sarr. Seydou has a purity and innocence as a character, not because of his rose-tinted naivety, but because throughout the journey, and even as his illusions are systematically shattered, he never loses his selflessness and empathy for the others who share his plight. But if Seydou represents all that is good in humanity, there is no shortage of representatives of the darker side of man – at one-point Seydou finds himself separated from his cousin and locked in a Libyan prison run by criminals as a torture facility and extortion factory. But Garrone (*Gomorra*, *Dogman*) balances the extreme ugliness of this chapter of the story against cinematography that finds unexpected beauty throughout.”

Wendy Ide, *Observer*, 6 April 2024

“For Garrone, this proves an energizing shift in focus, yielding his most robust, purely satisfying filmmaking since his international breakthrough with *Gomorra* 15 years ago. Shorn of the splashy formal trickery that has marked such outings as his media satire *Reality* and the adult folklore of *Tale of Tales*, *Io Capitano* is surprisingly classical in construction and style, wisely guiding

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our attention away from its sure directorial touch and toward the story at hand — pieced together by a small army of screenwriters and collaborating contributors from first-hand migrant accounts.

Some will reasonably wonder if a predominantly Italian creative team is best qualified to portray this odyssey. *Io Capitano* does have its moments of inauthenticity, where Garrone's western aesthetic and narrative instincts feel somewhat imposed on the material, which hardly aims for the political specificity or poetic complexity of a film like French-Senegalese director Mati Diop's migrant ghost story *Atlantics*. But it's hard not to be caught up in the film's grand, honestly felt emotional sweep, and wherever the directorial perspective feels underqualified, that of Seydou Sarr, the film's remarkable young Senegalese lead, makes up the difference.

A local TikTok star who also contributes multiple songs to the film's vibrant Afropop soundtrack, Sarr has the natural, immediate screen magnetism necessary to carry a narrative that could risk becoming a litany of abuses and indignities visited upon the protagonist who shares his name. 16-year-old aspiring singer Seydou may be put through the wringer on a journey that takes in desert trekking, prison torture and slave labor, but he's never reduced to the status of mere martyr or symbol — enlivened, in particular, by the devoted, jocular bond he shares with his cousin and fellow traveler Moussa (Moustapha Fall).

Seeing no future for themselves in an impoverished Dakar township, Seydou and Moussa have long planned to escape to Europe to realize their musical dreams and support their families from afar — though Seydou's domineering mother (Khady Sy) won't hear of it, while a local elder warns them that the Continent's streets are lined with dead bodies. (An exaggeration, certainly, but Seydou is already shocked to learn that homelessness exists there at all.) And so they steal away without word, equipped with little more than patiently accumulated savings, soon to be swiftly depleted by a succession of scammers, extortionists and human traffickers with empty promises of safe passage.

The first such wad of cash goes on counterfeit Malian passports; the second on a truck ride across the Sahara that is abruptly terminated when Seydou, Moussa and their fellow passengers are abandoned in the dunes, left to walk to Libya in the care of an unreliable guide. Not everyone makes it, and Seydou struggles to adapt to survival-of-the-fittest tunnel vision. When the cousins are eventually separated, *Io Capitano* switches to an age-old mode of melodrama, a search

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across months and miles sustained by hope alone. There's an underlying romanticism to the film that counters the grittier, gorier realities of Seydou's quest, and the scarred, hobbled, progressively exhausted physicality of Sarr's performance. Certain moments of Hollywood-style kismet may strain belief, but they feel hard-earned just the same.

Not averse to the panoramic spectacle inherent in desert crossings or infinite expanses of ocean, though never overly prettifying Seydou's ordeals either, Paolo Carnera's muscular, color-rich lensing is in line with Garrone's straightforwardly soulful storytelling. There's little interest in hardscrabble vérité here: All the craft elements of *Io Capitano* work toward the common goal of granting a distinguishing epic scale to a story that, in the real world, would merely be counted as a statistic, one of many composing an international crisis. "I'm the captain," Seydou cries as his dream hoves into sight, an unabashed bit of pure movie dialogue that, whatever his fate to come, he deserves then and there."

Guy Lodge, *Variety*, September 6, 2023

"On the surface, *Io Capitano* concerns itself with an urgent issue: the flow of migrants from Africa to Europe. Fleeing often dire circumstances, they endure grueling journeys to end up in countries where their presence will be at the center of bitter political conflicts. The film, nominated for Best International Feature at the Oscars, begs to be called important. And yet it is most striking for how little it illuminates, and for how cheaply it turns human struggle into mere spectacle and sentiment.

Directed by Matteo Garrone ("Gomorrah"), the movie begins in Dakar, Senegal, where two teenage cousins, Seydou (Seydou Sarr) and Moussa (Moustapha Fall), are secretly saving money to migrate north. When Seydou cautiously raises the idea with his mother, she grows angry: "I don't want you to leave," she says. "You want to help me? Stay." The boys, though, feel like they have "no choice"—a logical trap that becomes a refrain throughout the film. But the conditions and constraints of their lives are presented with scant specificity, as though we should take it for granted that any African with ambition would want to leave the continent. The pair's professed goal—pop stardom—feels similarly vague, rendered without the social or cultural context that could help us make sense of this young duo's dreams."

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Zachary Barnes, *The Wall Street Journal*, February 22, 2024

“Matteo Garrone’s new film is part adventure story, part slavery drama; the slavery which did not in fact vanish with the end of the American civil war, but thrives in the globalised present day without needing to shapeshift too much, driven by the age-old forces of geopolitics and the market.

Seydou and Moussa, played by nonprofessional acting newcomers Seydou Sarr and Moustapha Fall, are 16-year-old cousins in Dakar, Senegal, dreaming of escape to the fabled land of the EU as refugees, where they expect to go viral and make a fortune as music stars like the people they’re watching on TikTok. For years they have been writing songs and secretly working on building sites while pretending to go to football practice, amassing cash savings which in the succeeding months they will hand over to various gangmasters, fixers and corrupt gun-wielding soldiers.

The boys get into Niger on fake Malian passports whose obvious inauthenticity generates a handsome bribe-income for crooked border guards. They pay handsomely to join a group crossing the Sahara to Libya in an unsafe van; they then have to go on foot in the burning sand, their hatchet-faced drivers and guides ignoring the people who fall out of the vehicle or collapse with exhaustion on the way. In Libya the boys are separated, one taken to what passes for official custody, the other to a prison used as a torture factory and cash slave-farm by Libyan warlords. Here, terrified migrants are told to get their parents to wire their entire life savings over if they don’t want their children to be brutalised and killed; this is a truly terrifying sequence. The official and unofficial jails are brought by Garrone into ironic parallel.

The boys are ultimately able to offer the tiny residue of their savings to join a crowded boat heading across the Med to Italy. The gangsters chillingly agree on condition that the teenage torture survivor, Seydou, will be the boat’s notional captain – hence the movie’s title. The gangmaster pretends to “train” him on how to navigate and use the GPS and he is then put in charge of all the trusting, terrified adults as they put to sea.

This is a movie with passion and sweep, although I was less sure about the fantasy-reverie sequences. Reality is stronger ground. Apart from everything else, *Io Capitano* delivers some home-truths about the boats used; they are notionally “captained” by one of the passengers, a wretched soul who, due to a

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nauseating twist of fate, may well be even less qualified and less able than everyone else. And the film shows a gruesome irony at work: refugees are part of a toxic hoax economy. The fixers know well that these people will almost certainly die en-masse in the desert or the ocean, and will be in no position to ask for refunds or warn anyone else.

Garrone shows Seydou battling heroically against this bad faith while growing miraculously into his captain status, despite the existential irony at work. Seydou and the others are not exactly masters of their fate, or captains of their souls, to quote WE Henley's *Invictus*. They are swept along by power and inequality, but Garrone shows that their humanity and compassion are still buoyant."

Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 2 April 2024