

Get Out! (Leisure & Travel)

by sorrel moseley-williams Herald staff

‘Don’t show us as monkeys’



The former fruit-and-veg market turned trendy shopping mall complete with 10 plush cinemas is a far cry from Patagonia and the flatlands of Buenos Aires province, but this week the Abasto centre hosted Argentine premieres set in these often-remote locations.

A rural theme has been running through the 12th BAFICI film festival, with *El ambulante*, *Los labios* and *Lo que más quiero*, which feature in the International and Argentina competitions, located in various rustic corners of the world’s eighth-largest country.

A barren scrub area in Chaco province, *El Impenetrable*, also made its big-screen debut on Sunday in *A Place Called Los Pereyra*, director Andrés Livov-Macklin’s first feature-length film. This documentary doesn’t simply

focus on the day-to-day amenities Los Pereyra’s residents are used to dealing without (namely electricity, running water and telephones), but encourages viewers to consider the way they undertake charity work.

Although *A Place...* hasn’t made it to the lofty heights of competition level at BAFICI, no matter, the fact it is screening is a feat in itself. Five years after first visiting Los Pereyra, a remote hamlet some 50km by dirt track from nearest town Miraflores (phoneboxes: one), Livov-Macklin’s 81-minute documentary opened in Argentina four days ago, four years after he filmed with a three-strong crew: a camera operator, a sound recordist and an assistant director.

The Buenos-Aires born filmmaker, who lives in Montreal, had heard about a fund-raising project organised by Northlands, a private school in the northern suburbs of Buenos Aires. Teenage “godmothers” would head to Los Pereyra for a week, taking donations such as food, pens and footballs to the tiny primary school, also offering their friendship and their own brand of solutions to the impoverished community — and so Livov-Macklin became a wall fly to the group of girls and their teachers.

He says: “It has taken a very long time mainly to be shown here because we had little funding. It’s hard to raise money although we received money from the Jan Vrijman Fund, and the National Film Board of Canada also chipped in. We only had US\$30,000 and a film of this calibre really needed US\$200,000 to make it. It was a constant battle.”

Not only did a lack of finances present a continual battle for the director and his Canadian producer, Hugh Gibson, but *El Impenetrable* really does what it says on the tin: it’s a difficult environment in which to live and work, to simply exist.

“This charity project has very much been at the will of the teachers, who have now retired,” says Livov-Macklin, who stayed on five separate occasions in Los Pereyra. “But there’s no water, no toilets — you have to do your business in the bushes — there’s no electricity, and a lot of bugs, snakes and scorpions. And there’s no security whatsoever. You could be attacked by a wild animal. The kids were playing football and my cameraman was standing on a rock for 20 minutes. It turned out there was a snake underneath which the kids then stoned to death — but it could have been my cameraman who ended up dying from a snake bite.”

From a similar educational background to the “godmothers” (Livov-Macklin went to St. Andrew’s school), he says the driving force behind the documentary is a question directed towards himself.

“It’s self-reflection because in high school we had a godparent scheme which is very common in Argentina.

Community centres, schools and churches get together and sponsor a school. My friends went on these field trips, and I always used to wonder what people thought of us. My friend went for a week and then came back. What do they think: was it like a UFO landing for them? It’s a bit like that, I think. And that was the driving question.

“The godmothers are idolised and these godmothers in a way are me, and so are most audience members — people from the city — and the film answers the question of what would happen if I went to stay in the jungle for a week. My main concern was what goes on with the villagers, not with the godmothers who are similar to me or you. So we shot before, during and after the godmothers had gone.”

Going back to 2005, he describes his own UFO-like landing in Los Pereyra. “The first time I went was a year before

the godmothers to see what was going on. The villagers immediately knew I wasn't from there as my face was as red as a tomato. It's very hot, deserted, with dense vegetation and temperatures often reaching 45 degrees. But I didn't have much contact with them over the couple of days I was there. I returned a few months later by myself just to observe for two weeks and I slept in the school library on the floor.

"I had my picture camera with me and sat in classes. I'm sure the kids were wondering who I was and what that thing — the camera — was with me." Did they question you? "No, they were very quiet — I think they were shy."

Livov-Macklin visited the community three more times, during which the parents made their voices heard. "They were very concerned about how I would portray them. Every now and then when they go to Miraflores and are able to watch TV, they see that poor people are demeaned on screen. Most TV stations are from Buenos Aires and the media can be particularly nasty towards that kind of people.

"I heard 'we don't want to be seen as monkeys' an awful lot."

In order to gain their trust and help them understand what he was doing, the filmmaker used some of Robert J. Flaherty's methods (director of the first commercially successful feature-length documentary).

"I would put the camera somewhere and explain what we wanted and if we wanted them to talk about something in particular. After shooting, we'd all sit around a monitor and watch it so they would understand that what we had just shot was exactly what they had said. And they approved. A lack of knowledge can produce fear. If people don't know what's going on, then they are scared so we broke that barrier — then they were very generous about letting us film whatever we wanted."

This fly-on-the-wall film wasn't scripted, insists Livov-Macklin. "All we knew is that the godmothers would come, then they would leave and that something would happen. We just didn't know what."

where &
when

A Place Called Los Pereyra. Directed and produced by: Andrés Livov-Macklin. Also produced by Hugh Gibson. Argentina/Canada, 2009. Distributed by Chapeau! Films.