

Lively daydreaming in El Techo

Published: Tuesday, September 12, 2017

At the start of *On the Roof* (El Techo), a flock of pigeons soars through the skies of Havana, in symbolic contrast with the lives of the people on the roof where their coops are housed.

The plot may not seem exactly gripping at first, and Cuban director Patricia Ramos humorously acknowledges this in some shots—several series of still images in which all the protagonists do is change position a few times in perhaps several hours.



Stars of El Techo, from left, Enmanuel Galbán, Andrea Doimeadiós and Jonathan Navaro.

She's set herself a challenge here: how to hold an audience's attention with a story about three young people who spend a hot, uneventful summer on top of their crumbling apartment building in Havana. All they do is daydream, waiting for life to begin. It's another world up there, the flat, confined, featureless roofscapes very different from the panoramic views of the real city and the sea beyond and below them. How do they move from one to the other? With no resources and no opportunities, how do they get a start?

The unlikely answer seems to be: open a pizzeria on the roof—but even then, its bustling, successful launch, with the young entrepreneurs lowering pizzas in baskets to their neighbours, is misleading.

But as is clear from the beginning, this isn't an action movie, but a gentle, sometimes romantic comedy. The three protagonists at first seem like unambitious idlers. But it transpires that they've all been betrayed by the parental figures in their lives, and must find their own way; no wonder at first they're drifting and uncertain how to find purpose in their lives.

Anita (Andrea Doimeadiós) has been abandoned by her mother, who has gone to the United States, though she calls from time to time to quarrel with her daughter. Meanwhile, Anita, who is pregnant—but hasn't told her mother—spends her time buying second-hand baby clothes and wondering who the father is. Not that she thinks that's very important. She hasn't seen her own father for two years. "I'll be by myself. Fathers don't matter," she concludes, unsurprisingly.

Yasmani (Enmanuel Galbán) tends his pigeons carefully; much of his energy is absorbed by similarly caring for, and trying to energise, his oddly childlike, passive father, who won't get out of bed because if he does he'll end up spending money he can't afford.

The earnest Vito (Jonhatan Navarro) seems the most proactive and positive of the three: he keeps busy, though in an odd activity—writing to officials in Italy. He's searching for his family there, eager to emulate the business success of his grandfather, who he believes once owned the buildings around them. Never mind that Vito is black—he's been convinced by his grandmother's stories that his grandfather was Sicilian, and he's determined to track down his relatives.

Though they spend much of their time alone together on the roof, the three are also part of the struggling, busy community on the levels below their lofty perch, and their plight is a microcosm of their country's, cut off from the world and battling against economic disadvantage. It turns out, too, that all sorts of activities take place on the roof—fights, personal grooming, and romance—as well as running a pizza business.

On the Roof is surprisingly lively, then. Even during the periods when Anita, Yasmani and Vito are doing little but passing their days in idle conversation, they remain cheerful and optimistic against the odds, and endear themselves to the viewer. Their spell on the rooftop won't be permanent—and there are some surprises in store.

Screening times

September 23, 1.30 pm,

MovieTowne POS Screen 8 Q&A

September 25, 3.30 pm,

MovieTowne POS Screen 7

September 25, 6 pm,

MovieTowne Tobago

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