

MOVIE REVIEW | 'ALMOST BROTHERS'

Friendship as a Frail Bridge Across the Chasm of Class

By STEPHEN HOLDEN
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"We have two lives: the one we dream of and the one we live," muses Miguel (Werner Schünemann), an idealistic upper-middle-class politician whose 50-year friendship with Jorginho (Antônio Pompêo), a criminal from the Rio de Janeiro slums, forms the spine of Lúcia Murat's "Almost Brothers." That observation serves as an epigraph for a movie that reflects on the seemingly unbridgeable class differences in contemporary Brazil, a country of devastating economic inequities.

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Despite being edited in a style that jarringly blurs the past and the present by switching from one to the other without preparation, "Almost Brothers," which opens the Premiere Brazil! series at the Museum of Modern Art today, is strong stuff. Addressing recent Brazilian history, it contemplates the economic and psychic chasm dividing rich and poor, whites (like Miguel) and blacks (like Jorginho, called Jorge), and offers no palliatives.

Although some early scenes are set in the late 1950's, when Miguel and Jorge are children, most of the time the film jumps back and forth between the 1970's, during the Brazilian dictatorship, and today. Paulo Lins, who wrote the screenplay with Ms. Murat, also wrote the novel that inspired "City of God," a film that offers a similarly nightmarish vision of bottom-rung society in contemporary Rio de Janeiro. Both films portray neighborhoods disintegrating as nihilistic, gun-toting adolescent gang members casually slaughter one another.

In 1970, Miguel (Caco Ciocler), a guerrilla activist and son of a middle-class businessman, is rounded up with other opponents of the dictatorship and sent to the notoriously brutal Ilha Grande maximum security prison. He and his fellow political prisoners form a disciplined collective that rejects drugs, makes decisions by committee and carries out a successful hunger strike for better conditions.

In prison, Miguel reunites with Jorge (Flavio Bauráqui), a common criminal with whom he became friends when his father, a musicologist studying the samba, spent many heady evenings at a club in the Santa Marta favela, or slum, making music with Jorge's father, a samba composer and neighborhood legend. (The movie has a wonderful score by Naná Vasconcelos). Jorge, jailed for robbery, joins the collective, and the childhood friends renew their bond over a shared love for the samba.

But as the ranks of political prisoners thin, and the number of common criminals increases, the balance of power shifts. The turning point comes with the arrival of Pingão (Babu Santana), a macho gang leader and thug who refuses to follow the collective's

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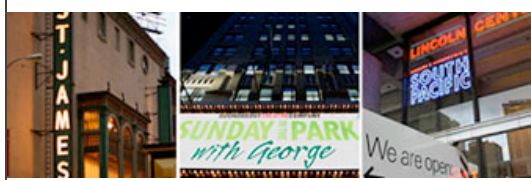
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rules, and the two sides end up having to be separated by a wall. One of the movie's bitter observations is that the same organizational tactics adopted by the activists sowed the seeds for the formation of the Red Command, the most powerful drug trafficking organization in Rio de Janeiro.

When the story jumps to the present, Miguel, now a senator and do-gooder campaigning for an urban renewal project in Santa Marta, visits Jorge in prison to enlist his support. Jorge is now the neighborhood drug lord who commands his little army from prison via cellphone and is overheard casually ordering an execution.

This bitter, hardheaded movie doesn't let us off easily. In the cruelest plot twist, Miguel's beautiful, insolent daughter, Juliana (Maria Flor), is having an affair with Deley (Renato de Souza), one of two warring gang leaders in Santa Marta. The film portrays the middle-class fascination with the lower depths (in Juliana's case, with hot outlaw sex) as a risky exercise in arrogant self-delusion.

The despairing threads of the story twist into a tragic knot during the final scenes, in which Miguel drives through Carnival while the law of the street pays a visit to Jorge in prison. Every masked reveler leering into the windshield wears an expression of savage mockery.

Almost Brothers

Opens today in New York.

Directed by Lúcia Murat; written (in Portuguese, with English subtitles) by Paulo Lins and Ms. Murat; director of photography, Jacob Solitrenick; edited by Mair Tavares; music by Naná Vasconcelos; production designer, Luis Henrique Pinto; produced by Ailton Franco Jr. and Branca Murat; released by Imovision and One Eyed Films. At the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, Manhattan. Running time: 102 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Fernando Alves Pinto (Peninha), Flavio Bauráqui (Jorginho in the 1970's), Caco Ciocler (Miguel in the 1970's), Renato de Souza (Deley), Maria Flor (Juliana), Luiz Melodia (Seu Jorge), Antônio Pompêo (Jorginho today), Babu Santana (Pingão) and Werner Schünemann (Miguel today).

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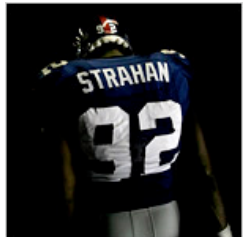
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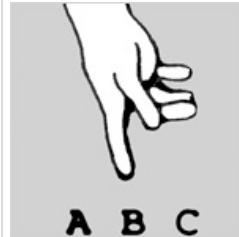
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