

'The Train of Salt and Sugar' ('Comboio de Sal e Acucar') Film Review | Palm Springs 2018

1/16/2018 by Justin Lowe

The Bottom Line

A stirring and heartfelt account of conflict and survival.

Mozambique's first-ever Oscar foreign-language film entry is an epic tale of peril and endurance on an arduous cross-country journey.

During the final phase of the Mozambican Civil War, which spanned 15 years over the 1970s-1990s, well-armed anti-government rebels cut off access to basic commodities in the African country. Caught in the middle of a brutal conflict, desperate civilians attempted to survive by any means available, traveling hundreds of miles to trade locally produced salt for sugar in neighboring Malawi.



Courtesy of Palm Springs International Film Festival

Licínio Azevedo's involving Portuguese-language feature *The Train of Salt and Sugar* insightfully personalizes that journey for an imperiled group of travelers, representing an auspicious awards-season debut for Mozambique's emerging national cinema.

Azevedo zooms in on the waning years of the war in the late 1980s, when the country's beleaguered railroad offers the only reliable means of transportation, despite frequent sabotage and insurgent attacks. Recently graduated from nursing school, Rosa (Melanie de Vales Rafael) wants nothing to do with politics, but the train trip offers her only hope of reuniting with her family on the other side of the country, so she reluctantly boards, along with dozens of other refugees and salt traders. The mysterious Commander "Seven Ways" (Antonio Nipita) and his subordinates, Lieutenant Taiar (Matamba Joaquim) and Ensign Solomon (Thiago Justino), along with a detachment of 50 soldiers, safeguard the passengers on their journey.

Trouble begins even before the train reaches rebel territory when Solomon accosts Rosa, insisting that she cook for him, although he clearly has more than domestic duties in mind. Taiar, the only formally educated soldier in the detail, forces Solomon to back off, but there's obviously bad blood simmering between them. Rosa finds refuge with intrepid trader Mrs. Mariamu (Sabina Fonseca), who becomes Rosa's assistant once rebels begin attacking the train and the young woman volunteers her medical expertise to care for the wounded. In fact, Taiar's support for her efforts doesn't appear to be entirely selfless and once personal feelings become involved, their relationship blossoms. However, the perilous train trip and Solomon's menacing scheming threaten to cut their wartime romance short before they can safely reach their destination.

With a cast largely unknown beyond Portuguese-speaking audiences, Azevedo relies on universal themes of survival, dignity and honor to convey a powerful narrative of hope and regeneration. The train journey represents not only an attempt at achieving a better life for many of the passengers, but metaphorically it's also a psychologically transformative experience. Rosa, sheltered from the war while studying in university, confronts the conflict directly when guerillas ambush the train and

she's forced to care for multiple casualties. For his part, Taiar finally gains a glimpse of a better future after years of dehumanizing war, dreaming of settling down on a farm with Rosa and raising livestock.

After smaller parts in several other features, de Vales Rafael confidently steps into the role of Rosa. Embodying the character's youthful determination and resourcefulness, the actress instills Rosa with cautious optimism for a nation free of warfare and violence against women. Joaquim appears less assured playing the conflicted soldier, rarely expressing Taiar's uncertainties about his military service with clear conviction.

Azevedo gets great mileage from the war-torn locations that still dot the scenery along the train route and creatively positions the hulking diesel locomotive, with its two-dozen rickety cargo cars and near-complete lack of amenities, as a colorful character throughout the film. Shooting almost exclusively outdoors, he adroitly captures the interplay of escalating threats between the passengers and the unknown dangers lurking throughout the surrounding landscape.

Production company:	Ukbar Filmes
Distributor:	Juno Films
Cast:	Matamba Joaquim, Melanie de Vales Rafael, Thiago Justino, Antonio Nipita, Sabina Fonseca
Director:	Licinio Azevedo
Screenwriters:	Licinio Azevedo, Teresa Pereira
Producers:	Pandora da Cunha Telles, Pablo Iraola
Director of photography:	Frederic Serve
Editor:	Willem Dias
Music:	Joni Schwalbach
Venue:	Palm Springs International Film Festival (Awards Buzz)

In Portuguese
93 minutes

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