

Director Franco Rosso

Toast of Babylon

Stuart Ross

English director Franco Rosso's *Babylon* is an intensely violent film. Most of the violence is not graphic, but suppressed and seething, much like the pre-riot Brixton in which the story takes place. The film is about Blue, a black youth whose search for a future and an identity sends him further into the alienation of his society, and drives him to acts of rage, desperation—and futility.

Says Italian-born Rosso about the North American debut at Toronto's Festival of Festivals: "The screening's reception was almost as expected in a way, because it was predominantly a white, middle-class audience with a lot of guilt complexes."

When the film opened in England nine months ago, it showed first at black cinemas and cinemas in Brixton. "It's much more exciting with a black audience because they actually get into the film much more. There's a lot more talk back to the screen. It's terrific."

knife wounds

An integral part of the film is music — reggae dub (wordless reggae tracks). Blue, when not fitting exhaust systems into old cars, is the 'toaster' (the guy who sings over the wordless tapes) for Ital Lion, a sound system which plays its music at parties and dances in back street clubs — an answer to London's West End discos. The music is so brilliantly enmeshed into the images and soundtrack that it takes on an almost physical presence: bursting out of welding torches, smashed headlights and knife wounds. The music is a result of the youths' social situation: manual work, continual outside pressure and limitations. In many ways, the music is a grasp at an identity, just as Rastafari is to many youths.

Babylon was conceived by Rosso and screen-writer Martin Stellman over five year ago, and foreshadows last summer's Brixton riots with frightening accuracy: "The interesting thing is, people say, 'You almost prophesied' — which was nonsense because it was there for everybody to see. But no one was actually saying or doing anything about it. The majority mentality is that if you close your eyes, it'll go away. But of course it didn't. It was going on for too long, it was bound to happen."

Though the result turned out to be a very slick film (compared to something like *The Harder They Come*, for instance), Rosso could not find any financial backing initially, regardless of the importance of the film's subject. Complains Rosso, "They really do have a different criteria. To them it's a totally uncommercial project, totally unacceptable. I think, in a lot of ways, that that kind of thinking is why cinema is going down the tubes. The people who are financing films no longer know their audience, they're totally out of touch. They don't go to pictures any more." *Babylon* ended up costing the English equivalent of \$600,000, a tiny price for so vital a film.

Babylon's set had to be closed because of the film's extremely sensitive subject matter. It was restricted only to actors and crew. The filming took six weeks on location in South London and

the West End, the heart of the racial tension depicted in the film.

After the film was finally completed, with the help of producer Gavrik Losey (who has worked on such projects as *Magical Mystery Tour* and *Stardust*) the problems didn't disappear. Rosso laments bitterly, "It's really difficult. America doesn't want to take it, because they say they'll have race problems. Jamaica won't take it. They've banned it because they have a Seaga government — basically a right-wing government as opposed to Manley's, and they're anti-Rastafarian. The Rastafarian movement in Jamaica right now is very powerful politically and is very much behind Manley, so I don't think the Seaga people want to give them any ammo."

In England, of course, the reaction to *Babylon* has been vehement, not only from right-wing whites, but also in the form of a right-wing black backlash.

"I think people are so ignorant of the people they live with in England, the Jamaicans they live with. I'm sure that half the people don't realize they come from islands that are a thousand miles apart — Trinidad and Jamaica are fucking thousands of miles apart. The majority of the people are really ignorant — they think they just come from one fucking island, and there's no politics there, and there's no right-wing blacks and left-wing blacks. And of course there are."

"And the right-wing black reaction was 'These kids are using terrible West Indian obscenities, and our kids aren't like that. Why don't you show the positive side of black life?' So those kinds of reactions were very strange. But the kids who experienced the thing were very much behind it, and saying, 'Yeah, that's exactly it, that's exactly how it is!' But there was this right-wing backlash and it was interesting — I mean, those people really didn't know what their children felt or were experiencing."

There were also the expected

complaints about the fact that Rosso is white and what was he doing making a film about black problems, anyway? "Yeah, I've got over that one, but I did get complaints initially, from blacks as well as whites. That problem never actually worried me," he explains, "because I never really looked at the people I was working with as different from what I am. If you say a white doing this is wrong, then it also imposes on the young black filmmakers never to make a film about whites. In a way, it's a form of racism."

Rosso's main motivation seems to be his disgust with English society and politics. "I did this film because I believe we live in a class society. And until that class system goes, until the bottom brick of the pyramid is pulled away and the whole thing tips, in England we won't ever have any real change. One of the ways in which you maintain a class structure in a class society is to divide and rule amongst people who are basically working people—keep those people from uniting."

"You will never change the status quo."

"It's the quickest way. Get two people, both of whom are oppressed, fighting about colour, fighting about irrelevancies, during times of great economic depression and strife, and they're very easily exploited through paranoia and fascism. The point of making this film was to show that people are exactly the same, though."

"I don't know how prejudice and racism work here, but unfortunately, the blacks, by mere definition of being black, are identifiable, so they're an easier target. I mean the same thing happened to the Jews before the war, but they're kind of moved along the social ladder now. They're about fourth from



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bottom, and the blacks are very firmly on the bottom—perhaps we've even got the Asians beneath them. So, as long as you have that solid, stiff, class-oriented society, you will never change the status quo. The status quo will dominate."

One scene in the film depicts the police raiding a reggae club, trying to bash down the door. The kids inside are barricading the entrance, but they look ready to fight. Blue has taken the microphone, and as he sings, the rest of the crowd joins in: "I can't take no more of that, no I can't take no more of that." Things are looking pretty bleak.

Rosso says, unapologetically, "In a way, we kind of got the thesis wrong, because what happened in Brixton when similar situations actually happened, was that the kids actually defeated them quite easily. So, in a way, we're being very pessimistic. We completed the picture about a year ago, and at the time, that's all we could see. We were proven wrong though. It is possible for a group of kids to stand up to the kind of oppressive forces which were

there and actually defeat them.

"And that's what came out of those riots in Brixton. It was the kind of situation where the police simply over-policed the area, and for about three or four years, were really smashing people up. And so, by those kinds of things that happened in Brixton, they've now actually changed something. They forced change. It's very sad when we're living in a society where your leaders are supposed to be aware of things that are going on, and the only way, in fact, you can make people listen to you, is to take the law into your own hands, and change it. That's a breakdown in government somewhere."

oppressive forces

A man dedicated to what he believes in, Rosso continues to do "totally uncommercial films". One of his current projects is a film on Northern Ireland, and he's having equal trouble with that because "no one in England wants films on Northern Ireland."

Another major project is a film starring British pub-rock singer Ian Dury (of Ian Dury and the Blockheads). Rosso tells the story: "I've known Ian for a long time. He had polio as a kid and he's a cripple, and I wanted to do something with him 'cause he's got such a stage presence. I was talking to him one night, and he said, 'You know, if I hadn't have been a pop musician I would have been a crook, because I'd have no alternative unless I wanted to live on social security, with one of these green disabled cards, which I don't wanna do'. And that started me thinking: O.K., you've got a character who's 40, a cripple and what's he gonna do? The idea evolved out of that."

"It's very much a reflection of the kind of situation in England as it stands now, where the people who have it are in a position where they're never going to lose it, and the people who don't have anything get robbed, screwed, can't afford to eat, and God knows what. People who have nothing are robbing people who have nothing to be robbed of."

"But nobody's putting any money into that film either, because you can't make money out of cripples, so it's not commercial, you see."



Brinsley Forde and Karl Howman star in *Babylon*, opening tomorrow at Eaton's Centre Cineplex.