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The Road to San Diego

El Camino De San Diego By DEBORAH YOUNG

(Argentina)

A 20th Century Fox release (in Argentina) of a Guacamole Films/K&S Films production in association with Wanda Vision. (International sales. TF1, Issy-les-Moulineaux, France.) Produced by Oscar Kramer, Hugo Sigman.

Directed, written by Carlos Sorin.

Tati - Ignacio Benitez

Waguinho - Carlos Wagner la Bella

Soledad - Maria Marta Alvez

Carlos Sorin's delightfully offbeat "The Road to San Diego," about a young backwoodsman with a

Maradona fetish, is another audience-friendly addition to the director's repertoire of bizarre human interest stories, most notably his doggy tale "Bombon El Perro." Though it may take some critical drubbing for its vision of Argentines as all naive, good-hearted folk prone to idol worship, the story isn't all fluff, returning to the roles chance and fate, as well as religion and idolatry, play in a man's life. This highly accessible Latin American entry could have the same legs as "Bombon" with skilful handling.

Tati (Ignacio Benitez), a wood mill worker from the distant Misiones province, is introduced in backwards baseball cap carrying a chain saw with a wink to Lisandro Alonso's well-known "Libertad." There every resemblance to Argentine minimalism ends. In an opening half hour of laugh-out-loud mockumentary, village old-timers tell the camera about Tati's overriding obsession with soccer champ Diego Maradona. Among other oddities, he has Maradona's number "10" tattooed on his back; his parrots cry "Maradona" in chorus.

When his hero is hospitalized in April 2004 with a heart attack, Tati decides to make the long journey to Buenos Aires to give Maradona a present of a huge root he has found in the forest and carved into a vague resemblance of the soccer star. In spite of being laid off, penniless and with three kids to support, Tati hits the road with touching dedication.

It doesn't seem likely this ragged hillbilly who doesn't know how a camera works will ever meet Maradona, yet Sorin's script cleverly leaves room for doubt. Was it destiny or simple chance that caused Tati to find the root he believes looks like his hero? The question finds no answer, and the ending is left teasingly open for an optimistic future.

On the way to St. Diego (the ambiguous slurring of sports talent and sanctity is deliberate), his path is humorously strewn with locals struggling through the country's very real economic crisis, including "Bombon" leads Juan Villegas as a camera shop owner and Walter Donado as an ambulance driver. Standouts in a sea of memorable faces are Maria Marta Alvez as a girl from a roadside brothel and the sweet Lila Caceres as a young wife on a pilgrimage to pray to the cowboy saint "Gauchito Gil."

The non-pro cast brings an innocent goodness to every role. Even the good-humored Brazilian truck driver who gives Tati a lift is a nonactor, played with professional self-assurance by film and TV producer Carlos Wagner La Bella. It's hard to find an ill-tempered or mean-spirited character in a film where even Maradona's guards are kind and helpful.

For a story so totally lacking in conflict, "The Road to San Diego" is surprisingly involving. Much credit belongs to the low-key savvy of the technical crew reprised from "Bombon." Cinematographer Hugo Colace and editor Mohamed Rajid play with team spirit in finding just the right image and detail to keep the action on its toes.

Camera (color), Hugo Colace; editor, Mohamed Rajid; music, Nicolas Sorin; production designer, Margarita Jusid, Carina Lujan; sound (Dolby Digital), Carlos Abbate, Jose Luis Diaz Ouzande (Abbate & Diaz); associate producer, Jose Maria Morales. Reviewed at San Sebastian Film Festival (Official Selection), Sept. 22, 2006. Running time: 97 MIN.

With: Juan Villegas, Walter Donado, Paola Rotela, Silvina Fontelles, Miguel Gonjalez Colman, Jose Armonico, Pascual Condito, Otto Mosdien, Claudio Uassouf, Lila Caceres