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The Human Cargo

La nave dolce
(Documentary -- Italy-Albania)

By JAY WEISSBERG

An Indigo Film, Apulia Film Commission, Ska-ndal Prod., Rai Cinema production, in collaboration with Archivio Centrale Statale del Film di Albania, Telenorba, Digitalb. (International sales: Rai Trade, Rome.) Produced by Nicola Giuliano, Francesca Cima, Carlotta Calori, Silvio Maselli, Ilir Butka. Directed by Daniele Vicari. Written by Antonella Gaeta, Benni Atria, Vicari, based on an idea by Gigi De Luca, Silvio Maselli, Ilir Butka.

With: Eva Karafilii, Agron Sula, Halim Milaqi, Kledi Kadiu, Robert Budina, Eduart Cota, Ervia Alia, Ali Margjeka, Giuseppe Belviso, Nicola Montano, Domenico Stea, Fortunata Dell'Orzo, Luca Turi, Raffaele Nigro, Maria Brescia, Luigi Roca, Vita Leccese. (Italian, Albanian dialogue)

Twenty-one years ago, the cargo ship Vlora disgorged roughly 20,000 Albanian refugees into the Italian port of Bari. Images showing the astounding mass of people and their subsequent mistreatment by overwhelmed authorities have been largely forgotten now that clandestine crossings are common and met with apathy, but Daniele Vicari's timely "The Human Cargo" movingly and efficiently captures the historical event, allowing informed auds to draw their own parallels between past and present. Composed of frank interviews and a wealth of disturbing news footage from the time, the docu will benefit from a Venice berth before sailing into satcast harbors.

Unencumbered by a perceived need to sensationally fictionalize the already sensational, as he did in "Diaz: Don't Clean Up This Blood," the helmer wisely adopts a straightforward approach, making the words of those involved the sole commentary to the disturbing images.

The year 1991 was an especially disruptive one in Albania, where communist rule was teetering on the brink. Years of isolation (except for Italo TV broadcasts) had taken their toll, and life in the West offered the dream of salvation. Yet just as dreams are about emotion rather than deliberation, so the thousands of freedom-seekers who rushed the Vlora in the port of Durres that stifling August didn't consider what the Italians were likely to do once they arrived.

Unsurprisingly, on seeing the ship so jam-packed that even the crow's nest was bursting with enthusiastic Albanians good-naturedly chanting "Italia!" the authorities freaked out. Hundreds of refugees jumped into the cooling harbor waters, but once on dry land, they, like the rest, had to wait (in some cases for several days) before being crammed like sardines into buses and brought to a nearby stadium.

If conditions on the ship and shore were uncomfortable, in the arena they were dire. With the feds, the city, and the police barely communicating, and no one taking responsibility, the asylum seekers were locked in the stadium, where the broiling sun and woefully inadequate facilities made the situation worse. Police trucks backed up against the gates to prevent people inside from breaking out, while helicopters tossed food and water from above like zoo keepers feeding the animals. Thuggish elements within cornered the supplies, and the playing field looked like a battleground.

Footage of all this, often shot on early video and now showing its age, forms the docu's core, maintaining the power to shock, notwithstanding graininess. Interviews, lensed against a white screen, provide the commentary, and offer personal directness and immediacy. Italo auds may be surprised by the presence of popular dancer-thesp Kledi Kadiu, just 17 when he boarded the ship. Others include filmmaker Robert Budina, translator Eva Karafilii, and even the Vlora's mild-mannered captain, Halim Milaqi, a reluctant player in the whole affair.

The pic's title in Italian translates as "The Sweet Ship," referring to the Vlora's cargo of sugar, just transported from Cuba, and the only food to eat during the crossing. Benni Atria's editing is commendable.

Camera (color, HD), Gherardo Gossi; editor, Benni Atria; music, Teho Teardo; sound (Dolby digital), Valentino Gianni, Gianluca Costamagna. Reviewed at Casa del Cinema, Rome, Aug. 23, 2012 (In Venice Film Festival, noncompeting). Running time: 90 MIN.

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