



Mississippi
Alberta
North Portland

METRO

Vancouver
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Beaverton



The harsh realities of life in Manila are depicted in a scene from 'Metro Manila.'

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Confronting Harsh Realities

Third world drama 'Metro Manila' one of the best films of 2014

OPINIONATED JUDGE

BY JUDGE
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I saw "Metro Manila" back in February at the Portland International Film Festival and was so blown away by it that I hoped, against hope, that this taut and carefully constructed tale of a Filipino family trying to survive the harsh realities of life in Manila might actually get a U.S. theatrical release, though the commercial prospects for a tale in Tagalog seemed doubtful. My hopes failed to materialize, but the film is now available on Netflix and iTunes and Amazon, and I'm determined that everyone should see it. It's one of the best films I saw in 2014.

You wouldn't necessarily get that from the film's marketing or from reading the reviews. It's marketed as an urban thriller, and that is the focus of the praise it has garnered (which

is less than it deserves, in my view). The latter part of the film does indeed turn into an intricately plotted, life-and-death crime story, but the film derives its power from the human story at its center, a story that many critics seem to have dismissed as pedestrian.

Its protagonists are Oscar and Mai, a loving couple with two small daughters who have been eking out a living farming rice in a remote province. When the economics of rice farming become untenable, they quite reasonably decide to move to Manila to find work. They are used to hard work, and both are strong, smart, and determined. But nothing can prepare them for the harshness of life in the city, and the cruelty of the people and circumstances they will encounter there.

There is nothing clichéd about the film's depiction of the couple's circumstances; we are hardly swimming in movies that sink deeply into the harsh realities of life in places like this. The film shows us what kind of people Oscar and Mai are and what fuels their choices. We see how they work together, how they respond to setbacks, how they attend to the needs of their daughters. Their love for each other is simple and specific.

They are duped out of most of their meager savings almost immediately upon arrival in Manila. It is clear that their naïveté is born of lack of experience; no one would expect the harshness of what they encounter. Mai is forced to take a job in a go-go bar, her loveliness her only marketable asset in this place. She stolidly submits to the reality of a situation that she clearly finds repugnant; though Oscar takes it as a mark of his own failure to provide, she tells him, simply, "Sometimes the only thing left to hold onto is the blade of a knife."

After not getting paid for a day of honest manual labor, Oscar appears to luck into a more lucrative and dangerous opportunity: he takes a job driving an armored car through the streets of a city whose extremes of wealth and poverty are far beyond what most Americans can imagine. His seeming benefactor is Ong, who helps him through the application process and takes him on as his partner. But before long the story moves from drama to thriller as the stakes of Oscar's situation escalate, and Oscar soon finds that he must fight past his own revulsion on occasion. Ong, with his fast talk and ready laugh, is Oscar's guide to the ways of this world. His advice to Oscar to "stick your finger down your throat" (mistaking Oscar's despair for physical illness following a night of mandatory hard drinking with his colleagues) feels laden with significance.

I was surprised to learn that the film's director, cinematographer, and screenwriter

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