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Killian Fox on Sin Nombre, a Sundance favourite about Central American immigrants

The dangerous beauty of Mexico is at the heart of outstanding new film Sin Nombre, which looks at the plight of Central Americans as they dodge bullets and board boxcars in a bid to enter the US Exodus scene from Sin Nombre. The US-Mexico border, and the obstacle it presents to northbound Mexicans, is well-trodden territory in cinema. Less documented is the challenge facing Central American immigrants before they even get there, on the long journey up through Mexico. This journey, as a brilliant new film shows, can involve clambering on to the roof of a freight train and clinging on for weeks, exposed to the elements, police and preying gangs. Sin Nombre, which created a big stir at the Sundance Festival, views the exodus from two sides. Sayra (Paulina Gaitan) is a Honduran teenager bound for New Jersey; El Casper (Edgar Flores) is a young recruit in the ruthless Mara Salvatrucha, a real-life gang operating across Central and North America.

Their stories collide in Mexico and the film, already a neat synthesis of social drama and gangland thriller, turns into a chase movie. Sin Nombre is the outstandingly confident first feature from 31-year-old Cary Fukunaga, who dodged bullets and interviewed gang members during his research. What's most impressive is his restraint. Sin Nombre builds tension by moving slowly, like the trains, and avoiding stylistic tics and fast edits in favour of long shots which absorb Mexico's dangerous beauty.

Sin Nombre is released on 14 August

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