

VARIETY

**IFF Panama: Abner
Benaim Preps 'Plaza
Catedral' and Ruben
Blades Doc**

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PHOTO BY SOFIA VERSBOLOVSKIS

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Director of Panamanian Academy Award entry ‘Invasion’ aims with ‘Plaza Catedral’ to make a dark film in a tropical setting

PANAMA CITY — One of Panama’s leading helmers, 44-year old [Abner Benaim](#) – whose past pics include hit 2010 comedy “Chance” and 2014 doc “Invasion,” about the 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama – is currently prepping a new fiction feature “[Plaza Catedral](#)” (aka “Bien Cuidado”), while continuing to lens on music doc “[Ruben Blades Is Not My Name.](#)” He also has a documentary short, “Zachrisson,” screening at this year’s [IFF Panama](#).

In line with Benaim’s other recent projects, both titles are co-

productions between his own company, Apertura Films, and Argentina's Gema Films, run by Gema Juárez Allen.

"Plaza Catedral" won the 2015 Berlinale Co-Production Market VFF Talent Highlight Pitch Award. It returns to one of Benaim's favorite themes, the contrast between rich and poor, but represents a shift in cinematic style, as he explores a thriller-drama, with a neo-noir aesthetic.

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The film is about a street kid called "Bien Cuidado" who looks after people's cars and one day comes bleeding into one of his neighbor's houses. The story takes place in Panama's historic old quarter, where rich and poor still live side by side.

Benaim has already addressed this question of the gulf between rich and poor in his 2010 comedy hit "Chance" and his 2013 documentary, "Maids and Bosses."

"Class differences are some of the most important problems in Latin America and Panama is a good example," he says. "Things are very

polarized. The rich are very rich and the poor are very poor.”

However, whereas many of his previous films have highlighted social issues, Benaim aims to explore new ground, focusing on the personal, almost existential, crisis of his main character – a man locked into a dark-self questioning crisis in the midst of a vibrant and colorful community.

His previous films have achieved considerable box office success in Panama. “Chance” outperformed “Avatar” at the Panamanian box-office, with 140,000 admissions and also clocked up a further 150,000 admissions in Colombia. His 2014 docu “Invasion” recorded over 50,000 admissions.

“Plaza Catedral” has been on hold over the last 12 months, due to a funding freeze at Panama’s state film fund, but Benaim expects to be able to start lensing in the second half of 2016.

“I’m very excited about this project,” reveals Benaim. “This is the type of film I always thought I would make, when I studied filmmaking. I wanted to try to do something that would resemble darker films like the works of Polanski, but against the backdrop of a tropical setting. My main character is a very grey, melancholy person who lives in a colorful tropical place.”

Benaim aims to explore the dramatic conflict between the character's own dark existential doubts and the color, vitality, energy and noise around him.

In November 2015, Benaim also began shooting his forthcoming musical documentary, "Ruben Blades is Not My Name," about Panama's most famous celebrity – actor-singer-songwriter Ruben Blades, who is a former Minister of Tourism, was presidential candidate in 1994, obtaining 20% of votes, and has also starred in films such as "Fear the Waking Dead."

The docu feature has backing from Ibermedia, COPA airlines and Panamanian TV station TVN. The producers are also in talks with co-producers from the U.S. and Latin America and sales agents for worldwide rights.

Benaim believes that the U.S. market will be important for the film and that success in the U.S. box office would unlock sales potential throughout the Americas.

"I don't believe in making films just for Panama," says Benaim. "It's not feasible economically. It's too small a market. You need to aim at least for Latin America."

But unfortunately distribution networks are not set up that way.”

Benaim nonetheless believes that given the trans-national fame of Blades and the international appeal of his music, the docu feature will travel across territories.

“If a film is good, it will find a market. With Ruben Blades and his music there’s tremendous potential because he has lots of followers throughout Latin America, the U.S. and the world. I just need to concentrate on making it good. Otherwise it will just be a TV program.”

Benaim believes that the style of the film – which is a new departure for him – will be critical to the film’s success.

“Music is profoundly international and has a kind of nobility to it,” he says. “You don’t need to look for a scoop. You can let it go.”

“I usually try to find a style that fits the content well,” he continues. “I want people to watch the documentary and feel just as excited as if they’d seen him perform live or met him in person. Like when something incredible happens on stage or in a party. It’s about that excitement and love for music. Understanding the passion. It’s not purely intellectual. It’s about keeping the passion intact.”

Looking further ahead, there are many more social issues that Benaim would like to address.

“There are still plenty of elephants in the room in Panama and across the region.

“Problems tend to be hushed up here. I’m a big believer in trying to vent frustrations and getting things out into the open.”

There are nonetheless some internal resistances to tackling taboos.

Benaim reveals that when he made “Invasion” there wasn’t any overt resistance but he did get a lot of last-minute rejections from people he wanted to interview.

“That just made it all the more urgent for me, when I realized that some people were still ashamed about the subject. It proved we were doing something relevant.”

At this year’s IFF Panama, Benaim is screening his 27-minute documentary short “Zachrisson” about the Panamanian painter and engraver, Julio Zachrisson, who has been working and living in Madrid for 60 years.

Zachrisson has reached the end of his career, and now is blind. The film is an intimate portrait of his career, memories, and the themes of old age and love.

“I like the film very much,” says Benaim. “I did it very intuitively. With no script, or production schedule. It was just based on an encounter shot in Madrid.”

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