

## CLASSIC RENTAL

# MAN LIKES DOG BOMBÓN: EL PERRO

ARGENTINA/SPAIN, 2004.

Reviewed by Orlando Hughes

Directed by Carlos Sorin. Starring Juan Villegas, Walter Donado, Rosa Valsecchi.

THE CLIMATE IS HARSH in Patagonia, on the remote southern tip of Argentina—both the tough, windy cold and the hard reality of unemployment. The wilderness, and the economy, make few compromises, and provide a scant living for all but the most fortunate.

Juan “Coco” Villegas (most of the actors in *El Perro* use their own names) has worked for decades at a petrol station. He's made redundant at the age of 52, with little prospect of finding work. Living in a highly stressful household with his daughter, mother, and continually yelling wife, our quiet hero makes daily sorties onto Patagonia's endless roads in search of a way to get by. He hawks handmade knives to oil-field workers. He visits unwelcoming garages for work and registers with an impossibly unpleasant job agency.

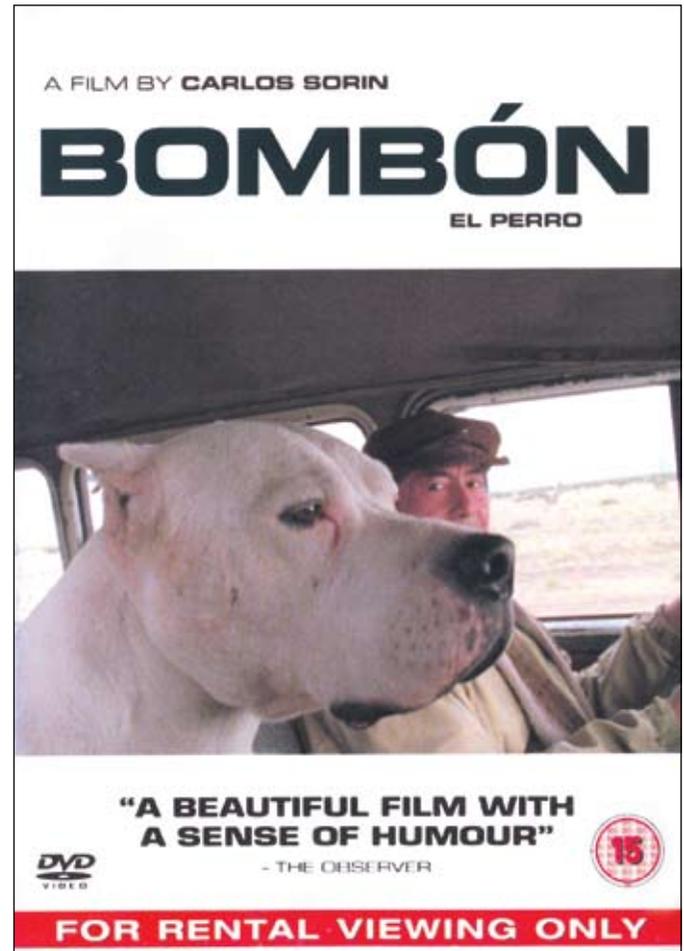
One day, after helping a woman whose car has broken down, he becomes the bemused new owner of an impeccably bred Argentinian hunting dog, Bombón: a huge and unprepossessing beast whose charm only emerges over time—much like that of his native land. The subsequent adventures of Coco and Bombón are a beautiful showcase of humanity.

In many ways this film is about loss and love, about performance anxiety and about the waxing and waning of self-esteem. (An incidental plot-line turns around Bombón's inability to inseminate a series of attractive candidates—it turns out to be based on the director's real-life experience with a bull he once bought for a song).

To lose a job of 20 years at Coco's age can be a severe blow, and his response to this bleak outlook is the central theme of the film. But he has a simple approach to life, and takes knockbacks, humiliations and good fortune with enviable composure and gentleness, and seems to unconditionally retain his trust and affection for others. Somehow he contrives to navigate an indifferent world with dignity and an impeccably-mannered sweet nature. Perhaps it is some kind of reward that Bombón has been sent to adjust his fortunes in various subtle ways. There is no bitterness in this film, and it is far from bleak in its outlook. Everywhere we turn there is kindness and warmth, humour and hope—softly expressed, as at the end, when Coco once again takes to the endless road, seeking his fortune.

To remark upon excellent performances from a cast of non-actors seems a little irregular. But praise is assuredly due to these people who have managed to imbue their characters with such vivacious empathy and pathos.

By choosing non-actors director Carlos Sorin matched the people that he auditioned to the written parts. Consequently a huge number of takes, and wealth of footage, were required to find the ‘moments of truth’, but we are rewarded with results which are authentic and worthwhile. Sorin assembled a small team to deal with incessant travelling and the rigours of filming strictly according to the order of the narrative, and has produced something intimate and elemental.



Walter Donado plays an ambiguous character with an overbearing yet affable manner, and it is unclear even at the end whether he is more a confidence trickster or just another man struggling to get by. Coco's romantic involvement with restaurant singer Susana (Valsecchi) remains subdued and ambiguous to the end, and typically for this film is based on a shared humanity and understanding of the hard roads we must sometimes travel.

Here, in short, is an exceptional film about a man of few words and a dog of few tricks journeying through a difficult world of surprises and wonders—and a most excellent pair of specimens they are.