

COHEN MEDIA GROUP PRESENTS

# IO CAPITANO

A FILM BY MATTEO GARRONE

**BEST DIRECTOR**



MOSTRA INTERNAZIONALE  
D'ARTE CINEMATOGRAFICA  
LA BIENNALE DI VENEZIA 2023  
Official Selection

**BEST PROMISING ACTOR**



MOSTRA INTERNAZIONALE  
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121 minutes,

Countries of Origin: Italy, Belgium, France

Languages: Wolof, French

Aspect Ratio: 1.85:1



**Rai Cinema**



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## SYNOPSIS

Two Senegalese teenagers, Seydou and Moussa, travel from Dakar to Europe in the hope of becoming pop stars in Europe, finding danger, heartbreak and unexpected joy along the way.



## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

*Io Capitano* recounts the epic journey of two young men from Senegal who make their way across Africa—and through myriad dangers—in pursuit of a dream called Europe. We began work on the film by listening to the actual accounts of people who survived this contemporary odyssey, and we decided to orient the camera from their perspective: a sort of reverse shot compared to the images we're used to seeing from our Western perspective in an attempt to finally give voice to those who don't usually have one.

— **Matteo Garrone**



## ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

From writer-director Matteo Garrone (*Gomorrah*, *Dogman*) comes an epic odyssey from West Africa to Italy told through the eyes and experiences of two Senegalese cousins — teenagers living in Dakar who yearn for a brighter future in Europe. But in between lies a tense and treacherous journey through myriad checkpoints, across the scorching Saharan desert, inside dank North African prisons, and atop the choppy waters of the Mediterranean Sea, where thousands have died packed inside seafaring vessels barely fit for passage.



Winner of the Silver Lion for Best Director and the Marcello Mastroianni Award for Best Young Actor at the 80th Venice International Film Festival — for newcomer Seydou Sarr, making his feature-film debut — *Io Capitano (Me Captain)* is the Italian entry for Best International Feature Film at the 96th Academy Awards, and was recently nominated for two European Film Awards, including Best Film and Best Director.

Capturing the contemporary immigrant experience from the perspective of those making the crossing through Africa and into Europe, *Io Capitano* is equal parts action-adventure, road movie and coming-of-age drama, told primarily in the Wolof language. Written by Garrone, with Massimo Gaudioso, Massimo Ceccherini, and Andrea Tagliaferri, and cast largely with non-professionals, including Sarr and his co-star Moustapha Fall (who became close friends during the production), *Io Capitano* was filmed on location in Senegal, Morocco, and the waters off Marsala, Italy.

“I wanted to capture what we rarely see in immigration-themed movies, which is the journey of the migrants before they arrive at their destination,” says Garrone, who worked closely with actual migrants on the development and production of the movie. “We are used to seeing the last part of the journey—the image of the boat arriving—followed by the ritual count of who’s alive or dead. I wanted to tell this story from the migrant’s point of view, like a reverse shot, revealing what we in Europe know, but never see. This is a first-person, life-or-death journey from Africa to Europe, an eternal journey for anyone who has sought out a better life. Behind all the numbers and statistics are people with dreams, and families.”



## “EUROPE IS NOTHING LIKE YOU IMAGINE”

Sixteen-year-old Seydou (Seydou Sarr) lives in poverty in a Dakar slum with his widowed mother and young siblings, playing soccer, writing songs with his cousin and best friend Moussa (Moustapha Fall), and drumming at local gatherings while his family dances the night away. But the cousins have bigger plans — pop stardom in Europe, where they dream of signing autographs for their white fans. “Europe is nothing like you imagine,” a Senegalese elder warns. But the cousins press on, lured by seductive images of Europe on their smartphones.

Stashing away money from construction jobs, Seydou and Moussa sneak away to Agadez in Nigeria without telling their families, the first step on a daring journey abroad using forged Malian passports. Days turn into months; after crossing the Saharan desert, watching fellow migrants disappear or die along the way, the cousins find themselves captured, separated, imprisoned, and tortured by their Libyan captors. Arriving in Tripoli on a construction job, determined to find his cousin and complete their journey to Italy, Seydou is presented with a daring and terrifying mission by a Libyan trafficker.

In telling the story of two migrant teens making the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean, with no guarantee of entry or even arriving alive, writer-director Matteo Garrone came across harrowing statistics—over 27,000 migrants listed as dead or missing in the Mediterranean in a given year. One story in particular drew his attention when he began researching *Io Capitano*—a 15-year-old African boy without nautical experience who was hired by a trafficker to ferry a ramshackle vessel from Tripoli to Sicily with 250 migrants aboard.

Garrone was initially wary of telling an immigrant's story; this was neither his world nor his immediate experience. “I felt I was on dangerous ground being from a middle-class Italian background and speculating on impoverished African migrants—the risk of being perceived as opportunistic was very high,” says Garrone, whose previous features have examined organized crime and reality TV, among other subjects, from a specifically Italian perspective.

“When I came across the story of Amara Fofana, the teenager who steered the boat to Italy, and decided to make my next film about African migration, it became crucial to not simply *re-tell* these stories, but to have those who lived them, and lived to tell them, on set with me, whether in front of the camera or at my side during the production. This is a film I made together with my collaborators—it's my vision, but it's their experience, their story, their journey, their point of view.”

With *Io Capitano*, Garrone wanted to capture the experience of contemporary African migration to Europe as if he, and the audience, were along for the ride, experiencing the highs and the lows, the heartbreaks and the unknowns, at every stage of the crossing. “I wanted to be an intermediary, entering another culture, traveling along with these people on their epic journey,” says Garrone. “I use the word epic because I believe these people are the representatives or carriers of the contemporary epic, an *Odyssey* of our times.”

Garrone knew he would also be telling a story in a language not his own, making the collaboration and participation of real-life migrants all the more important to the production. Before the writing phase commenced, he assembled a team of consultants who were present in various capacities for the entirety of the production, from the development and writing phases through shooting and post-production, offering insight, clarification and authenticity at every turn.



## A GLOBAL TEAM

Garrone had already directed a feature in a language not his own—his 2015 English-language fable *Tale of Tales*, starring Salma Hayek and John C. Reilly, and his breakthrough crime story *Gomorrah* brought him international renown. But *lo Capitano* marks the first time the writer-director-producer has worked on an international scale, telling a story outside his native Italy, working with a cast and crew that spoke predominantly African dialects, and filming in locations from Dakar to Casablanca, including the vast Saharan desert.

“Every movie is the result of collaboration, because you are making something with a variety of different people, but this one was more collaborative than usual because I was shooting outside my native language,” says Garrone. “I didn’t understand anything when I was directing the actors—many of whom were not trained actors themselves. I found myself directing to the sound of them—to their *language*. Another reason why it was absolutely crucial to have migrants with lived experience on set.”

Garrone wrote the script with previous collaborators Massimo Guadiso, his co-writer on *Gomorrah*, *Reality*, *Tale of Tales* and *Dogman*, and Massimo Ceccherini, a co-writer of *Pinocchio* who has also appeared as an actor in Garrone’s films. Andrea Tagliaferri, Garrone’s assistant for many years, also collaborated on the screenplay. Written as a collage, or composite, the script combines the stories of several young people who made the African migration to Europe, including Amara Fofana, who became a consultant on the film.

The writing team painstakingly researched videos and photographs documenting the migrant journey to Europe, watching harrowing, often crowd-sourced footage and choosing locations for the story that resembled the places they encountered in their research. From this footage, they created a map for what would become central characters Seydou and Moussa's journey from Dakar to Sicily.

But they needed someone who had made the trip from West Africa to Europe—someone who could pepper the story with authentic anecdotes and incidents. Through a journalist friend of Garrone's, the production team found their principal consultant in Mamadou Kouassi, who was working at a social center for migrants in the Southern Italian city of Caserta, helping recent arrivals adjust to their new home. After Garrone reached out in 2019, Kouassi began sharing breathtaking stories of making the African crossing. He soon became an essential member of the filmmaking team.

An Ivory Coast native who was 15 years old when he crossed the Saharan desert into Libya, then Italy, Kouassi experienced many of the challenges Garrone's protagonists would come to face in the *Io Capitano* script. He saw migrants abandoned and left to die in the desert. He was captured, imprisoned and tortured by the Libyan Mafia. Separated from his cousin, and traveling companion, he spent three years in Libya trying to cross into Europe, during which time he was bought and sold as a slave by traffickers. Kouassi finally made the journey to Italy by boat, stowing away in the engine room and working for months to gain his freedom on the mainland after he arrived.





“As I met with Matteo and his co-writers, I explained the difficulties of crossing the desert, how much we suffer, how many times I’ve seen people die in front of me without being able to help them,” says Kouassi. “I told Matteo all the stories of me and my cousin wanting a better life because of images we saw in magazines and on TV. We saw Europe as this free country where you can achieve anything. This is a movie about human rights, about people going to great lengths to travel to faraway, unfamiliar places in order to find that better life.”

With meticulous detail, Kouassi re-created the journey with his cousin, their preparations, their fears, and their heartbreaking decision not to tell family members they were leaving because of the high risk of death along the way. Like Seydou and Moussa in the film, Kouassi and his cousin spent many months working and saving money, even going to the local cemetery to seek benediction from their ancestors, a scene Garrone replicated for the movie.

“This movie took me back to real things I faced in my own life when I was younger,” says Kouassi. “I knew my mother would have forbidden me from making the journey to Europe, so I left without saying goodbye. Ten years passed, and I couldn’t go home to see her after I settled in Italy. She passed away before we could reunite.”



## ASSEMBLING THE CAST

Additional consultants on the production included Amara Fofana, Arnaud Zohin, Brhane Tareke, and Siaka Doumbia, each contributing unique stories from their own migrant journeys. Garrone’s composite story begins in Dakar, Senegal—but *lo Capitano* could have been set anywhere in sub-Saharan Africa because it reflected so many different, yet familiar, stories. Ultimately, Garrone chose Dakar as his initial setting because his lead actors came from there.

“What was most important with this decision is that we weren’t showing migrants fleeing from war or climate change, which would have been a different movie,” says Garrone. “We are used to thinking that migrants arriving in Europe by boat are fleeing desperate situations—but a lot of migrants are simply young and curious. They are making the journey to discover the world and follow their dreams.”

During his research, Garrone learned that 70 percent of Africa is populated by young people. Through smartphones and social media, globalization has taken root on the continent, for better or worse. “Young Africans have a window on European culture—they watch rappers and football on TikTok and Instagram,” says Garrone. “They see our world and it looks full of life and full of promise. But they don’t see what is behind all that.”





They also see a life that is unattainable to them due to an unjust system allowing travel in one direction only—from Europe into Africa. “Their teenage peers from Europe can travel to Africa and experience the greater world, but African citizens cannot make the same journey,” says Garrone. “African teenagers see European kids the same age arriving freely to holiday in Dakar—but those African teens can’t travel to Rome.”

Garrone worked with several casting professionals across multiple territories, including Francesco Vedovati in Italy, Constance Demontoy in France, Amine Louadni in Morocco, and Iman Djonne in Senegal. Garrone focused his casting on Senegal after initially scouting Senegalese teenagers in France and Italy, growing frustrated because a young European immigrant’s point of view was so different from an African who never left the continent. “It was more important to find actors who hadn’t left their country of origin—who had never set foot in Europe,” says Garrone. “We found who we were looking for in Dakar.

After auditioning hundreds of teenagers to fill the central roles of Seydou and Moussa, Djonne found Seydou Sarr, a 16-year-old rapper and TikTok star with 140,000 followers whose mother and sister were actors in Dakar; and Moustapha Fall, an aspiring actor who was attending theater school in the capital city. Both teenagers were singers, with a penchant for songwriting, an attribute the writers immediately wove into the script.

“They had the necessary talent to fill the roles but it’s always guesswork and you can only go by their auditions, which were promising,” says Garrone. “Like many young people in Africa, Seydou and Moustapha dreamed of visiting Europe but had never left Senegal. They had the same restless desire to escape their country of origin as the characters we had written.”

In *lo Capitano*, the character of Seydou has to carry the entire film on his shoulders, requiring an actor who could convey the complete range of adolescent tumult, from naivete to experience, without losing the core innocence that defines Seydou until the rousing final moments of the movie. “While I found Seydou to be sweet and naïve when we cast him in Dakar, I never imagined he would go on to bring so much intensity to his presence on screen,” says Garrone. “Many things happen to Seydou the character over the course of this movie, but he remains unfailingly human; Seydou the actor found a way to preserve that innocence and humanity throughout the story, bringing qualities that were never on the page, including his own spirituality and faith.”

Sarr and Fall developed a close bond during pre-production and filming, writing and producing the songs they sing in early scenes in the film, requiring the upstart actors to record them together in a studio. During production, they had their own rooms to sleep in at night, but found themselves holding sleepovers due to the rigorous intensity and shared experience of playing Seydou and Moussa during daylight hours.

Sarr and Fall weren’t the only cast members discovered during the open calls in Dakar before cameras rolled; other non-professionals who didn’t make the cut for major roles were employed as extras or crew members during filming, scouted in Morocco by casting consultant Henri-Didier Nikjam. “Many of the extras and crew had made the journey themselves, and they were proud to show the team, and the world, what it feels like to make this kind of journey, because often they simply aren’t believed,” says Garrone. “They were open, generous, and trustworthy, and they were also the movie’s first audience because they were in front of the monitor with me during filming. We made this movie together, and I always wanted their reaction to what we were creating.”



## THE SHOOT

Principal photography on *lo Capitano* began in Dakar on March 14, 2022, with production continuing across 13 weeks in the Saharan desert and into Casablanca, Morocco, substituting for Libya and Niger, where war was underway. Shot in chronological order, corresponding with Seydou and Moussa’s journey in the script, the production culminated in the waters of Marsala off the coast of Italy, the actors unaware of their characters’ fate until the final moments of filming.

After brief rehearsals in Dakar prior to production, Garrone opted not to give the script to lead actors Sarr and Fall so the actors could experience first-hand during filming what the characters experience on the page on their journey up the African continent. “From the outset, they didn’t know whether their characters would succeed in their journey or not,” says Garrone. “The dreams of our characters were the same as our leads, a sort of marriage between fictional teens and the real people who played them. Every day during production, they had to succeed in a new adventure—with the risk of death for the characters if they didn’t survive.”

Seydou Sarr found this aspect of production particularly challenging. “Because I’d never acted before, I didn’t know how movies are made, and I didn’t know anything about what was going on in the movie,” says Sarr. “Everything was done on the spot. I’d come in for the day, the producer would give me pages, the translator told me the dialogue in Wolof, and I slipped into character right away. I didn’t have time to think about it, or practice. It was purely instinctual.”

Neither Sarr nor Fall had much knowledge of the immigrant experience, relying on consultants like Kouassi to help them understand their characters and their plight as cameras rolled. “In Morocco we met a lot of African immigrants who told us their stories, and what happened to them during their journey across the continent, and Mediterranean,” says Fall. “We were having to replicate the specific situations, and feelings, of people who were with us on set. We knew how they felt while they were traveling and this inspired me when I was figuring out my character.”

*Io Capitano* was shot by director of photography Paolo Carnera (*Adagio*, *The White Tiger*), who also lensed the *Gomorrah* TV series based on Garrone’s breakout feature. Through scenes rich in cinematic style, bearing moods and textures that correspond with each location on the young protagonists’ vast journey, Carnera elicits unforgettable images and faces from the African continent, bringing to life a range of moods and settings.





Early scenes in Dakar, before Seydou and Moussa embark on their journey, are awash with music, movement, and vibrant color, invoking childhood innocence. Desert scenes, while romantic and ravishing in aerial shots, become menacing and doom-laden in close-up and medium shots, as marauders emerge from the dunes and wreak havoc on the unseasoned travelers. Extreme heat was one of the biggest challenges during production, with temperatures well above 100 degrees.

Long days of filming in the desert often required multiple takes from the actors. In one scene, Seydou turns back from the migrant caravan on foot to rescue a woman collapsed in the sand, who succumbs from heat exhaustion. “The chaos of filming in the desert heat grew into something unexpected and even touching,” says Garrone. “Seydou nailed the first two takes of the scene, but on the third take, the one you see in the movie, he started crying. Later that evening he told me his father had died in his arms in a similar way. When he was acting in the scene, he was seeing his father, not the woman.”

For the scenes in the Libyan prison, featuring glimpses of migrants being tortured in their cells, Carnera shifts to a darker, more morose palette, turning his lens on peeling, decaying walls and mutilated African faces, in bleak contrast to the blinding sunlight of the Saharan desert and Tripoli scenes. By the time Seydou (reunited with Moussa) departs Tripoli, ferrying 250 passengers across the Mediterranean Sea, Carnera shifts once again to images of exhaustion, desperation and constriction, alternating between close-ups and aerial long shots to capture the sheer terror of traveling across the sea with limited nautical skills into the great unknown.



## A CLOSE-UP FOR THE AGES

Playing out over the film's tense final half-hour, the boat sequence from Tripoli to Sicily took two weeks to shoot, with no time for rehearsal since the production was filming chronologically, and shooting time was dwindling. In the script, Seydou is required to steer the boat across Mediterranean waters with very few instructions. Off-camera, Sarr and Fall still had no idea if their characters were going to make it to their destination alive.

The action plays out in a glorified tugboat containing 250 migrants, including a pregnant woman and half a dozen stowaways who emerge suffocating from their engine-room hiding place during a tense moment in the journey. Seydou's instructions from his trafficker are scant: steer the boat in a straight line until you see the coastline; if you hit rough waters, drive the vessel into the waves, not away from them. His only guidepost—a compass, and a burner phone for emergencies.

“We had no time for rehearsals and we were at the end of our own journey, which is why we got such intense performances from the actors,” says Garrone. “During the scene where Seydou helps pull dying men from the engine room to the main deck, the actors who were gasping for air were recreating something they had endured in real life.”



In a heartbreaking close-up—and final shot—as a Coast Guard helicopter hovers above the boat in Italian waters, Sarr conveys a range of emotions, from shock and elation to defiance and pride, and more. Like Truffaut’s classic closing shot in *The 400 Blows*, *Io Capitano* ends frozen in ambiguity, the future uncertain.

Seydou’s close-up is a revelation, with actor and character simultaneously taking ownership of the daring crossing. After ferrying every passenger to safety, his innocence and awe remains intact. “I never could have imagined Seydou bringing such a variation of feelings to that final shot—laughing, crying, pride,” says Garrone. “Nobody prepared him for that scene—it was something unexpected that happens very rarely in an actor’s career, never mind a director’s. It’s rare that I cry at the end of a movie, but I was crying, and I turned and saw the entire crew crying along with Seydou. That was a wrap!”

As for choosing to end the movie in ambiguity, Garrone offers only this as closure: “I wanted to give these people a voice, and be faithful to the stories they told me. The movie ends with the Coast Guard’s arrival near the Italian shore, but for Amara Fofana, who was 15 when he ferried 250 people to safety, he was sent to jail for six months on trafficking charges. He wasn’t a trafficker—he was the victim of an unjust system.”





## ABOUT THE FILMMAKER

**Matteo Garrone** (Writer, Director, Producer) was born in Rome in 1968. In 1997 he made his first feature film, *Terra di mezzo*, with his production company, Archimede. In 1998 his second film, *Guest (Ospiti)* and in 2000 *Roman Summer (Estate romana)*. *The Embalmer (L'imbalsamatore)*, from 2002, received the David di Donatello award for Best Screenplay and Best Supporting Actor and the Nastro d'Argento (Silver Ribbon) for Best Editing. In 2005 he was in competition at the Berlinale with *First Love (Primo Amore)*, and was awarded the Silver Bear for best soundtrack.

In 2008, Garrone wrote and directed *Gomorrah*, which won the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival; he won five European Film Awards including Best Film and Best Director, seven David di Donatello awards and 2 Nastri d'Argento prizes; *Gomorrah* was selected by Italy as the entry for Best International Film (then known as Best Foreign Language Film) at the Academy Awards and entered the Golden Globes as well as receiving BAFTA and César nominations.

With *Reality* (2012) Garrone again won the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival, followed by three David di Donatello awards and 3 Nastri d'Argento prizes; he returned to Cannes in 2015 with *Tale of Tales (Il Racconto dei Racconti)*, winning 7 David di Donatello and 3 Nastri d'Argento awards.

In 2018 *Dogman* was awarded the Best Actor prize at Cannes, subsequently winning 9 David di Donatello and 8 Nastri D'Argento prizes before being selected by Italy as the entry for Best International Film (then known as Best Foreign Language Film) at the Academy Awards

In 2019 he brought *Pinocchio* to theaters, winning 5 David di Donatello and 4 Nastri d'Argento awards as well as earning two Oscar nominations for Best Makeup and Best Costume Design.

<https://www.matteogarrone.eu>

# Io CAPITANO

**DIRECTOR / DIRECTED BY**  
MATTEO GARRONE

**SEYDOU**  
SEYDOU SARR

**MOUSSA**  
MOUSTAPHA FALL

**MARTIN**  
ISSAKA SAWAGODO

**AHMED**  
HICHEM YACOUBI

**CHARLATAN**  
DOODOU SAGNA

**SEYDOU'S MOTHER**  
KHADY SY

**SEYDOU'S LITTLE SISTER**  
VENUS GUEYE

**SISKO**  
CHEICK OUMAR DIAW

**PASSPORT MAN**  
JOE LASSANA

**NIGER BORDER POLICE**  
MAMADOU SANI

**BOUBA**  
BAMAR KANE

**WOMAN WHO FLIES**  
BEATRICE GNONKO

**PREGNANT WOMAN - BOAT**  
FLAURE B.B. KABORE

**PICKUP TRUCK DRIVER –  
DESERT**  
AFIF BEN BADRA

**CONNECTION MAN**  
OBSERVATEUR EBÈNE

**MIDDLE MAN –  
DETENTION CENTER**  
JACKY ZAPPA

**LIBYAN BUYER**  
ABDELLAH ELBKIRI

**POLICEMAN – DESERT**  
BIDAR ABDELAHAD

**LIBYAN PRISON GUARD**  
MOHAMED AMINE KIHIL  
**LITTLE ANGEL**  
MOUHAMED GAYE

**SENEGALESE FRIEND –  
FOYER, TRIPOLI**  
CHEICKH NDIAYE

**SENEGALESE FOYER  
MANAGER, TRIPOLI**  
BABACAR DIOP

**SENEGALESE WOMAN,  
FOYER TRIPOLI**  
EMILIE ADAMS

**DOCTOR**  
ALY NIANG

**MEDICINE SELLER**  
TAHA BENAÏM

**WOMAN WHO HELPS  
PREGNANT WOMAN**  
MIRIAM KABE

**WOMAN – BOAT**  
PRINCESS ERIKA

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