

DAILY NEWS

'Embalmer' Gets Under Your Skin

REVIEW

★ ★ ★ **THE EMBALMER** (U). Macabre but delicately rendered romantic triangle involving a dwarf taxidermist, a hunky chef and the girl he really loves. Perverse and chilling, but also novel, smart. With Ernesto Mahieux, Valerio Foglia Manzillo, Elisabetta Rocchetti. Screenplay by Matteo Garrone, Ugo Chiti, Massimo Gaudioso. Directed by Matteo Garrone. In Italian, with English subtitles. 1:44 (nudity, adult content, language). At the Quad, 13th Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues.

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By John Anderson
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The use of coerced romance as a narrative device has usually meant the boss chasing the secretary around the desk (even if, like me, a lot of moviegoers have never actually seen a boss chase a secretary around a desk). Traditional sex roles, in other words, played out amid the politics of oppression.

"The Embalmer" puts a twisted spin on the plot of so many women's films of the '40s and '50s — to say nothing of the novels of Theodore Dreiser — in which an older man with a power attempts to sexually exploit the younger object of his affection. In this award-winning film by Italian director Matteo Garrone, however, the older man is Peppino (Ernesto Mahieux); the one he wants is his younger, handsome and decidedly male apprentice Valerio (Valerio Foglia Manzillo). The devices involve orgies, indebtedness and the sabotaging of Valerio's one true love. The dynamic is discomfiting but true.

That Peppino is a distinctly unattractive character is not about his being a dwarf; it's about his being a taxidermist — a master taxidermist, who renders the dead into art and whose side jobs involve planting and removing drugs in corpses the Mob is sending in and out of Italy. Garrone uses the deceased flesh of animals to maximum repellent effect, the virtual smell of exploitation and death emanating off Peppino — who uses the opportunity he offers the younger man to make Valerio indebted to him.

That Peppino is a dwarf may simply be a result of Mahieux being a dwarf — the actor, one is sure, would make the oily and sinister aspects of Peppino's character just as repulsive if he were 6 feet tall.

Valerio is working as a chef at the time they meet, but being an apprentice taxidermist is far more lucrative, so he goes to work with Peppino, losing one girlfriend on the way but meeting several more — Peppino's tactic is to use Valerio to lure pairs of women for group sex scenes, progressively pushing Valerio toward homoerotic situations. It isn't until Valerio meets Deborah (Elisabetta Rocchetti) that things turn nasty: Unlike the guileless Valerio, she knows an evil dwarf when she see one. With Valerio as the battleground, she and Peppino fight a war for his heart, as well as his soul.

Garrone might have easily allowed "The Embalmer" to disintegrate into either low comedy or campy horror. That it's a film that feels true to the end, despite its melodramatic twists and turns, is a testament to the director. ■