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ON THE WEB

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ARTS & IDEAS/CULTURAL DESK

### FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW; A Boss Hopes to Teach More Than a Job

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

Poisonous mentor-protégé relationships have been a recurrent theme of movies for decades. Matteo Garrone's tricky comedy thriller "The Embalmer" subjects it to a diabolical homoerotic twist.

The protagonist, Valerio (Valerio Foglia Manzillo), is a waiter in his early 20's with the face and body of a god. He is taken under the wing of Peppino (Ernesto Mahieux), a dwarfish, sneaky-eyed taxidermist and embalmer of 50, who makes him a job offer he can't refuse.

Valerio finds himself the overpaid assistant and party sidekick of a free-spending boss who has some unspecified connection with the Mafia involving the disposal of dead bodies. Early on, Peppino gives the young man a macabre tour around his apartment, which is filled with stuffed animals. Valerio, who apart from his looks appears to be a blank slate, is dazzled by his boss's lifestyle of nightclub carousing.

The first casualty of Valerio's new life is his longtime girlfriend, who senses trouble and beats a fast, angry retreat. For a while the partnership is a hedonistic joy ride in which the two men go barhopping and bring home prostitutes for group orgies. It appears as if Peppino is using his handsome assistant as sexual bait, but as their relationship continues Peppino teasingly nags Valerio to integrate some homoerotic sex play into their games.

Valerio, whose sexual tastes are strictly traditional, rebuffs Peppino's friendly caresses, bestowed as jocular horseplay. The young man is selfish and blind enough to shrug this off as an almost accidental side effect of their debauchery. The truth begins to dawn only after Valerio is seduced by Deborah (Elsabetta Rocchetti), a beautiful, strong-willed young woman with whom he begins an affair that blossoms into love.

Deborah, no fool, recognizes that Peppino, who pretends heterosexuality (to himself as well as to the world), is madly in love with his assistant. When Valerio insists on bringing Deborah along on their travels, Peppino sullenly acquiesces. But he runs out of patience. And when Valerio announces he wants to live with Deborah, there ensues a brutal power struggle between them that ultimately turns violent. Each side wields a persuasive weapon. Peppino's is money, and Deborah's is sex. Torn between the two, Valerio tries to have both.

The screenplay evokes this psychosexual power struggle with perfect accuracy and finely tuned performances. But the movie also reflects Italian attitudes toward homosexuality in a society where only a small minority of gay men identify themselves as gay.

"The Embalmer" is finally a little too timid. During the party sequences the film cuts away from the action much too quickly, leaving you wondering about the degree of Valerio's pliability. While that reticence may be one of the film's teasing strategies, it feels artistically cowardly. The movie, which New Directors/New Films is showing tonight at Alice Tully Hall and tomorrow at the Gramercy Theater, also leaves its Mafia subplot frustratingly undeveloped.

Yet as an aching meditation on the power of beauty, this hits home. And the scenes in which the beady-eyed, middle-aged embalmer gazes longingly at the reclining half-naked body of the vapid but gorgeous young god he desperately wants to control have stinging force. In one of their final confrontations, Peppino explodes with exasperation at Valerio's readiness to settle for a conventional life with few prospects. "You could have the world at your feet," he exclaims. And he's right.

#### THE EMBALMER

Directed by Matteo Garrone; written (in Italian, with English subtitles) by Ugo Chiti, Mr. Garrone and Massimo Gaudioso; director of photography, Marco Onorato; edited by Marco Spoletini; music by Banda Osiris; art director, Paolo Bonfini; produced by Domenico Procacci; released by First Run Features. Running time: 101 minutes. This film is not rated. Shown tonight at 9 at Alice Tully Hall and tomorrow at 3 p.m. at the MoMA Gramercy, 127 East 23rd Street, Manhattan, as part of the 32nd New Directors/New Films series of the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the department of film and media of the Museum of Modern Art.

WITH: Ernesto Mahieux (Peppino), Valerio Foglia Manzillo (Valerio), Elisabetta Rocchetti (Deborah), Lina Bernardi (Deborah's Mother), Pietro Biondi (Deborah's Father), Benardino Terracciano (the Boss) and Marcella Granito (Manuela).

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