

REVIEW

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The Embalmer

L'Imbalsamatore

(Drama -- Directors Fortnight/Italy) A Fandango release of a Fandango production. (International sales: Intra Movies, Rome.) Produced by Domenico Procacci. Directed by Matteo Garrone. Screenplay, Ugo Chiti, Garrone, Massimo Gaudioso.

Peppino - Ernesto Mahieux

Valerio - Valerio Foglia Manzillo

Deborah - Elisabetta Rocchetti

Deborah's mother - Lina Bernardi

Deborah's father - Pietro Biondi

Boss - Bernardino Terracciano

Manuela - Marcella Granito

By **DAVID ROONEY**

Drawing inspiration from a Rome tabloid case of several years back to create a compelling drama of unfulfilled dreams and frustrated desires, "The Embalmer" pulls the audience into a dark, mesmerizing world that never loosens its grip. While the story of an unsustainable romantic triangle that disintegrates into violence and tragedy could have slid easily into blackly comic grotesquerie, director Matteo Garrone's measured approach and soulfully humane focus combine to dignify the characters, allowing the tale of solitude, longing and sorrow to inch quietly under the viewer's skin. Cannes exposure could open avenues into discerning arthouse markets.

After winning top prize in Nanni Moretti's Sacher Festival with a 1996 short film on the immigrant condition, which was later expanded to feature length as "Terra di Mezzo," Garrone continued working independently on slender budgets with subsequent features "Guests" and "Roman Summer." While intelligently observed and not without charm, those modest works seemed somewhat under-



Elisabetta Rocchetti, Valerio Foglia Manzillo and Ernesto Mahieux topline the thriller 'The Embalmer.'

reaching and studentesque.

With "The Embalmer," the director successfully negotiates a leap into far more complex, mature territory as well as onto a larger, more ambitious production canvas. At the same time, he shows a healthy disdain for the sort of increased slickness that transition usually dictates, maintaining some rough edges that give the drama texture.

Fascinatingly drawn central character is Peppino (Ernesto Mahieux), a middle-aged dwarf who's a skilled taxidermist with connections to the local underworld in a small coastal town outside Naples. At the zoo, he meets Valerio (Valerio Foglia Manzillo), an extremely tall, hunky young guy with a friendly disposition and a passion for animals. Offering better wages and a more interesting alternative to waiting tables, Peppino invites Valerio to assist him in his workshop, quickly establishing a rapport of firm friendship and protege-mentor admiration.

Unable to be open about his sexuality, Peppino sublimates his physical desire for Valerio by organizing double dates with hookers. Their bond solidifies further when the younger man's living situation with his family becomes strained, prompting him to move in with Peppino. When Valerio meets Deborah (Elisabetta Rocchetti), a rootless young woman who insinuates herself into his bed and into their lives and home, Peppino initially tries to accept the changes but becomes increasingly resentful of the intrusion.

Without cranking up any kind of artificial thriller mechanism, Garrone and co-scripters Ugo Chiti and Massimo Gaudioso expertly build an underlying sense of dread. This is insinuated initially through images of entrapment and imprisonment, and the disturbing presence of death and mummification shown in animal carcasses. In a far more macabre way, death figures in Peppino's work for the Mob, stitching heroin sachets into human corpses for transportation, a sideline of which Valerio appears ignorant.

The uneasy sense of some ugly development to come also emerges in the well-crafted look of the film, which remains visually dark, shot in grim, murky tones. Backed by a distinctive, melancholy score, the wintry exteriors underline the colorlessness of the environment, with its leaden skies, squat, characterless buildings, fog-bound roads, bleak beachfront and churning gray seas making a moody widescreen stage for the three-character piece.

Garrone skillfully welds together a carefully constructed narrative with natural, seemingly unpolished dialogue and an approach to character development that's deceptively loose and unstudied. In this aspect, he is helped immeasurably by Mahieux's nuanced performance in the pivotal role: sly and slightly sinister but by no means unlikable. The actor walks a fine line between sleazy manipulation and pent-up desperation, with the full extent of his character's aching need

becoming etched into his features as Peppino is driven to increasingly rash measures.

A model without previous acting experience, Foglia Manzillo brings sensitivity and openness to a difficult role. Valerio's choices rarely are backed by explicit motivations and the decision to play the uncertain sexual side of his relationship with Peppino mostly offscreen adds to this general vagueness. But his behavior remains plausible as the young man wavers in his loyalties, weighing the attraction of an utterly predictable, restrictive future of familial responsibility and unrewarding work against the more stimulating life offered by his odd, intelligent friend.

Rocchetti's role is more unsympathetic, with Deborah no less manipulative than Peppino but far less giving. However, the actress communicates a strong sense of longing that gives her an affinity with the triangle's other elements.

Camera (Technicolor, widescreen), Marco Onorato; editor, Marco Spoletini; music, Banda Osiris; art director, Paolo Bonfini; costume designer, Francesca Leoneff; sound (Dolby Digital), Maricetta Lombardo; assistant director, Salvatore Sansone. Reviewed at Technicolor, Rome, May 13, 2002. (In Cannes Film Festival - Directors Fortnight.) Running time: 101 MIN.

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