

## The Embalmer': Fluid Storytelling

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"THE EMBALMER" ("L'Imbalsamatore") isn't about its characters as much as the mysteries that govern them.

The charming, diminutive, fiftyish Peppino (Ernesto Mahieux) meets Valerio (Valerio Foglia Manzillo), a tall, modelish man in his twenties, at the zoo. In front of the ostrich, that is. They strike up a conversation and, in no time, Peppino informs Valerio he's a zoo taxidermist. Would Valerio like to be his assistant? Valerio's not too happy with his present job. It looks like a fascinating occupation, and Peppino's offering good money. Why not? He accepts and immediately enters a dark, exotic world where mute wild animals await stuffing, mounting and grim regeneration.

Like a fairy tale character -- Rumpelstiltskin immediately comes to mind -- Peppino is warm, welcoming and strange. He seems to stand astride two worlds, maybe three or four. We get the feeling he's luring Valerio into something more than taxidermy.

Suspicion -- on our part -- grows slowly but steadily. Peppino has an unusually obsessive interest in Valerio. When he invites the young man to join him and two women for some dinner and laughs, something doesn't sit right. And when Peppino gets resentful over Valerio's new relationship with a woman named Deborah (Elisabetta Rocchetti), it seems clear the older man is looking for something sexual or at least romantic.

A box-office success in Italy and a critical hit at Cannes and the New Directors/New Films series in New York, Matteo Garrone's movie finds a disconcerting niche between edgy character thriller and black comedy. (The initial scene, in which Peppino meets Valerio, is partially filmed from the blinking point of view of the ostrich.) But it assiduously avoids letting us settle on either possibility.

Peppino (who suggests a combination of Joe Pesci, Danny DeVito and John Turturro) seems to be a menacing presence in fits and starts. (The mafia, it seems, likes to use his embalming skills for cadavers, sewing drugs into the bodies.) No sooner has he lost his temper over Valerio's relationship with Deborah than he is recounting an amusing joke or warming up the room with his disarming grin. And he transforms dead animals into caricatures of beauty. He has some sort of artistic, tender sensibility; he's no ogre.

What does Peppino want from Valerio? Equally intriguingly, we wonder about Valerio. If Peppino is acting so jealous, why is Valerio allowing himself to remain in such a situation? He seems to have entered this unspoken contract with Peppino with a mysteriously casual agenda. Director and co-writer Garrone paves the way, intentionally, with questions rather than answers, and as we progress toward the movie's resolution, we can be sure of one thing: We have no idea how this story will turn out.

**THE EMBALMER (Unrated, 101 minutes)** -- *Contains sexual scenes, nudity and obscenity. In Italian with subtitles. At Visions Cinema/Bistro/ Lounge.*