

The Hollywood Reporter

FILM REVIEWS

Father -- Film Review

By Neil Young, septiembre 25, 2010 07:08 ET

Bottom Line: Experimental Basque feature shows, with patience-taxing calmness, that there's much more to a house than bricks and mortar.

SAN SEBASTIAN -- An exquisitely high-art variation on the haunted-house movie, Basque/Catalan co-production "Father" is the kind of ultra-rarefied, snail-paced fare that will bedazzle cinephiles and highbrow critics while leaving others bemused and baffled.

Second feature from 52-year-old writer-director Jose Maria de Orbe, shot on DV by Jimmy Gimferrer, rightly won the Best Cinematography award at San Sebastian where it world-premiered in the main competition, a commendably unorthodox selection. Further festival bookings will doubtless follow for this decidedly non-commercial enterprise, especially from programmers keen to showcase edgy, challenging work along the lines of Cannes laureate Apichatpong Weerasethakul.

Shot in the Basque country and Catalonia, the main location is a large, crumbling mansion surrounded by trees, which is where de Orbe himself actually grew up, though there's no mention of this in the movie itself. Indeed, it's only in the end credits that the viewer gets much in the way of specific information at all, De Orbe's technique being to present enigmatic vignettes without explanation or narration.

An elderly gent (Luis Pescador), presumably some kind of caretaker, is shown puttering about working on various small restoration jobs, and occasionally conversing on philosophical issues with a younger man (Mikel Goenaga) who appears to be a local clergyman.

There are other visitors from time to time, but for long stretches very little "happens" as such: Entire sequences consist of observing the play of light in the various rooms. (Gimferrer appears to have eschewed any lamps or artificial illumination.) In the latter sections, de Orbe includes scenes which combine the supernatural with the avant-garde as decayed black-and-white movies play - silently, and seemingly without a projector - on the walls.

The influence of directors Victor Erice ("The Quince Tree Sun") and Jose-Luis Guerin ("Train of Shadows") will be noted by those familiar with Catalan cinema's tradition of blurring documentary, fiction and experimentalism, and de Orbe's background in installation art is also evident.

Calm, ruminative and open to almost infinite interpretation, "Father" (the original title "Aita" is from the Basque language) will test and probably exhaust the patience of those seeking conventional narrative structures. But there are sufficient moments of low-key magic and delicate transcendence to keep us watching, many of them courtesy of Gimferrer's exploration and examination of light. The result is off-beat and eerie in a way that definitely lingers in the mind.

Venue: San Sebastian International Film Festival

Production company: Eddie Saeta, Barcelona

Cast: Luis Pescador, Mikel Goenaga

Director: Jose Maria de Orbe

Screenwriters: Jose Maria de Orbe, Daniel V Villamediana

Producer: Luis Minarro

Director of photography: Jimmy Gimferrer

Production designers: Juan Carlos Bravo, Sebastian Vogler

Editor: Cristobal Fernandez

Sales: Eddie Saeta

No rating, 86 minutes