

VARIETY

Father

Aita (Spain)

By JONATHAN HOLLAND

An Eddie Saeta production. (International sales: FilmSharks, Buenos Aires.) Produced by Luis Minarro. Directed by Jose Maria de Orbe. Screenplay, Orbe, Daniel V. Villamediana.

With: Luis Pescador, Mikel Goenaga. (Basque dialogue)

Home is where the art is in "Father," Jose Maria de Orbe's visually exquisite but frustratingly self-regarding meditation on the country mansion in which he grew up. Coming precariously close to the point where slow cinema grinds to a complete halt, pic resonates richly across a variety of themes, including Basque history and the relationships between past and present, fact and fiction. But it also reps a further bold step toward abstraction following Orbe's already demanding 2007 debut, "The Straight Line." Limited fest play is likeliest for a purist item whose demand-to-reward ratio is forbiddingly high.

Edited down from 70 hours of footage lensed over three years, pic is shot in Orbe's impressive, long-abandoned 13th-century ancestral home. Following a brief intro in which two workmen clear away the undergrowth from around the house, pic bids farewell to exterior shots. Inside, real-life caretaker Luis Pescador throws open the windows and lets the light flood in before sitting down and peeling an apple in real time. Pic fluctuates throughout between light and dark, as if to suggest that history is full of shadows.

Helmer Orbe and lenser Jimmy Gimferrer (who rightly took the cinematography gong in San Sebastian) appear to have thoroughly explored the house in search of angles that can be used as frames. Few of the film's lengthy, preternaturally static shots are not delivered through windows, doorways and the like, and the insistence on visual symmetries becomes wearying. The approach aligns Orbe with other Spanish auteurs such as Jaime Rosales and Jose Luis Guerin, though on this evidence, Orbe is becoming more abstract than either.

The early part of pic is broken up by short, unwittingly absurd dialogues between Pescador and a local priest that briefly illuminate areas of Basque history. However, these welcome verbal interludes soon cease, and it's back to lingering shots of Pescador as he does odd jobs and reflects on eternal verities. There are several references to Spanish film and painting, such as when fragments from early Basque films are projected, ghostlike, over the house's patched and peeling walls -- a technique that allows for the film's most visually memorable moments.

At times, a magnificent Basque choir can be heard coming through the walls. Pescador listens, appearing to be greatly and rightly moved by what he's hearing. Elsewhere, crisp soundwork complements the visuals superbly, though one scene featuring a knife cutting a cork is amplified to the point of discomfort. Camera (color, widescreen), Jimmy Gimferrer; editor, Cristobal Fernandez; sound (Dolby Digital), Eva Valino, Alejandro Castillo, Ricard Casals. Reviewed at San Sebastian Film Festival (competing), Sept. 24, 2010. Running time: 85 MIN.

Read more:

<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117943731.html?categoryid=31&cs=1#ixzz11U7GmJVI>

Visit [Variety.com](http://www.variety.com) to become a Variety subscriber.