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The Straight Line

La Linea Recta

(Spain) A Fresdeval Films, In Vitro Films production. (International sales: Fresdeval, Madrid.) Produced by Jaime Rosales, Ricard Figueras. Directed by Jose Maria de Orbe. Screenplay, de Orbe, Daniel Vazquez Villamediana.

With: Aina Calpe Serrats, Alejandro Cano, Blanca Apilanez, Ferran Madico, Sergi Ruiz.

By JONATHAN HOLLAND

"The Straight Line" pretty much hits the spot. Jose Maria de Orbe's often compelling, brutally clear-eyed study of the non-life and loves of an alienated twentysomething is low-frills, cinema-verite-style fare, defiantly made without the comforting trappings of cause and effect, characterization and music. Pic successfully transmits the aimless monotony of its protag's life while intermittently becoming monotonous itself. High-minded item will challenge the patience of all but the most diehard movie purists, while slowly garnering a cult rep on the fest circuit.

Virtually catatonic Noelia (Aina Calpe Serrats) works in a gas station, rents a room from Rosa (Blanca Apilanez) and spends her free time making ashtrays out of drink cans. During another job leaving ad fliers in letterboxes, she meets bike-mad Lucas (Alejandro Cano), who takes a shine to her. But sadly for Lucas, he's chosen someone who lives her life off the emotional register.

Passive, fearful of communication and entirely joyless, Noelia has learned that living life on your own terms, however unrewarding, means living in practical isolation. It seems churlish, in the circumstances, to describe Calpe Serrats' perf as flat. However, just one carefully placed half-smile would have enriched the character considerably and lent pic the emotional dimension it's so badly lacking, without tipping over into the sentimentality the scripters so obviously fear. As Lucas, Cano brings a little energy to the proceedings.

Despite all this, pic does its work by subtle suggestion, exemplified in its final redemption scene. Occasional moments of almost observational comedy, built around Noelia's attempts to gain access to buildings she's delivering to, work

beautifully. But there's only so much fun to be had from watching a blank face ride an elevator in real time, traveling on a straight line to nowhere.

Pic's slow, take-it-or-leave-it rhythm is established early on and well handled. Lensing emphasizes both the stifling claustrophobia of the interiors and the wintry ugliness of Barcelona's suburbs. Sound work is excellent, with entire mini-narratives developing offscreen as the camera passively records.

Camera (color), David Valdeperez; editor, Nuria Esquerra; art director, Rebeca Comerma; sound (Dolby Digital), Eva Valino. Reviewed at Buenos Aires Film Festival (competing), April 5, 2007. Running time: 95 MIN.

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