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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer and raconteur

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Cannes 2009 Day Seven: More Almodovar Is Less



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A quiet day movie-wise -- I only saw three films, mostly because I wasted five hours trying to resolve some WiFi problems so I could actually file stories...and then spent the rest of the time writing stories so I could file them.

Broken Embrace** (out of four) -- Pedro Almodovar has given me great pleasure over the years and so it's always a thrill to see a new movie of his. He's had very good films in his early, middle and mature years, whereas most directors peak creatively during one crucial

period (a la Coppola in the '70s). But Broken Embraces is fading from memory just hours after I saw it and is so slight that several critics and I had the same reaction: we quizzed each other about the twists in the film, wondering if we'd missed something. Was that all there was to it? Yep. In it, the commanding Penelope Cruz (really still coming into her own as an actress and star) plays the secretary to a powerful man. With an ailing father, she is compromised into becoming his mistress. Meanwhile, many years later we get the story of the film director who fell in love with her during the making of her first (and only) movie. The director is now blind, his single assistant has a son with an absent mysterious father (hmmm), and the powerful man's gay son now calls himself Ray X and wants to make a film with the blind director turned writer. A light melodrama, none of the soapy elements here will sound surprising or unexpected. What is unexpected is how little is done with it. Even fans of Almodovar will be nonplussed by the story. Why do artists so often assume their mature years should be devoted to serious work? Two stories within the story here indicate that -- if it interested him enough -- Almodovar could make a great comedy or genre piece that would be tremendous fun. The son of the assistant describes the plot for a vampire movie that sounds hilarious. And then we see what seems like roughly five minutes of the movie within the movie called Girls With Suitcases, which is an homage to Women On The Verge Of A Nervous Breakdown. Both of these glimpses of other projects are far lighter and funnier and more compelling than anything else in the film. Show me that movie is the invariable response of the

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audience. You can grow older without growing up; it's a pity Almodovar hasn't learned that yet.

Les Herbes Folles * 1/2 -- Director Alain Resnais has delivered one of the most perplexing films of the fest. Lars Von Trier's *Anti-Christ* has nothing on this one when it comes to throwing the audience for a loop. One hour into this film, I defy anyone to describe it accurately and know where it's headed. Is it a light, witty romantic comedy; a searching drama; a nihilistic fable and/or a satire of any or all of these? It begins with playful narration describing a woman who is buying shoes only to have her purse stolen. That purse is discovered by a mature gentleman who hesitates, picks it up and takes it to the police. Very small moments can lead to momentous changes, we are told (again and again and again). The man becomes mildly obsessed with the woman. Then the woman becomes obsessed with the man. Then they both turn on each other (though never at the same time). The wife of the man is of course at least 30 years younger and stunningly beautiful and yet still doesn't blink an eye when his mistress comes over for a chat. This is a French film after all. And constantly the mood is changing. A playful moment is followed by a harshly real moment of emotion and pain which is followed by something entirely else. And it all ends on a completely discontinuous, seemingly unrelated and very brief moment that left everyone shaking their heads in confusion. Some of the French partisans in the audience applauded but no one booed because they were still so bewildered. Here is my explanation:

Spoiler Spoiler

In the last scene, a small plane with our main characters is plunging out of control towards the earth. Suddenly, the camera zooms over the landscape and into a home where a little girl is asking her mother if -- when she comes back in another life as a cat -- she can have some cat treats. And the film ends. I should add, several other scenes in the last few minutes included "Fin!" prominently displayed on the screen so no one can be blamed for not being certain when the movie actually did come to a halt. The only explanation for this moment is to show the little girl's life cut short. Her time has ended just as the lives of the people in the plane ended. And why? Because the zipper on some pants broke. (That led to complications which led to the seeming crash.) See? The tiniest incident can change your world. That may not be an accurate reading but it's the only one we can think of and is the only way to put this fitfully amusing but confused trifle to rest.

End of Spoiler End of Spoiler

I Love You, Phillip Morris ** -- Is it possible to over-emphasize chemistry? It's a magical blending of two actors that can't really be predicted even with screen tests and readings. You just never know. This film by the writers of *Bad Santa* stars Jim Carrey and Ewan McGregor as two prison inmates who fall in love. Carrey is an inveterate con man and gives McGregor the lavish life Carrey believes they deserve. But Carrey's illegal activities keep getting him thrown into jail and kept away from his love. That's unacceptable so he begins a series of clever prison escapes that made him famous and shamed the Texas jail system to no end. Did I mention this really happened? Skipping blithely between comedy and drama, the film has some clever sequences and great scams. But through no fault of their own, I never bought that Carrey and McGregor were lovers. It's not out of any fear from them about getting physical; they just don't have any spark. Without that passion (which was also missing for me from the John Keats biopic *Bright Star* -- and a more dissimilar love story would be hard to name), nothing really matters. But the film does have some very fun moments, including mockeries of golf and Texas that won't be forgotten any time soon.

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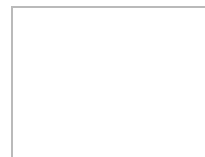
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