¡Viva! presents...
Carmina and Amen

Director: Paco León
Country: Spain
Date: 2014

This season is partly supported by Film Hub North West Central, proud to be part of the BFI Film Audience Network.

A review by Jonathan Holland for *The Hollywood Reporter*:

In 2012, popular Spanish actor Paco de Leon made a lightly-fictionalized, very enjoyable, low budget take on the life of his indomitable mother called Carmina or Blow Up. It was an unlikely hit, and in Spain turned Carmina Barrios into an unlikely cult figure. Now the Leon family returns with more of the same, and with more money. The result still feels fresh, but it's also more polished, sharper, and funnier -- one of those films which in the Malaga screening caught the laughter from the last gag drowned out the next.

Carmina and Amen is very Spanish, and within that, very Andalucian, and will be a big hit in Spain. But with careful marketing -- and superb subtitling will also be needed -- it also stands a better chance than most Spanish comedies of finding a home in the offshore arthouse: mothers, after all, are everywhere, and Leon is in good company when you consider that Pedro Almodovar included his own mother in his movies whenever possible.

In the film as in life, Carmina is a stout, heavy-smoking matriarch from a working class barrio of Seville. In the film's very first scene, her husband Antonio suddenly falls ill and dies. He'll remain there in his arm chair for pretty much the duration, since Carmina decides that she won't inform the authorities until she has received Antonio's bonus pay check, due the following Monday.

The plot is thin and deja vu: how can we hide the cadaver in the kitchen? But essentially it's just a device in which to allow the larger-than-life Carmina to be herself.

The tone of comic exaggeration is set early on with the exchange of complicity between mother and daughter Maria (Carmina's real-life daughter, and the director's sister, Maria Leon), an outrageously soap opera-ish extended goodbye involving accusations, guilt, money and tears. Through the film, we see Maria taking on some of her mother's characteristics.

Weary the plot may be, but the film's success lies in its dialogues. They are of the true-but-absurd kind that was once an Almodovar staple, and the best of them is during the visits from Carmina's neighbors -- essentially a group of women on the edge of a nervous breakdown.

They include Fany (Estefania de los Santos), who recounts her intimate experienecs with a masseur who gave her "energy", and the much franker, new age, dope-smoking Yoli (Yolanda Ramos): all are masters the bourgeois euphemism such as "the amatory arts", using high-sounding language to lend polish to their stories of their sexual experiences. One character, a stout, impassive-faced lady given to fantasizing about the Spanish royal family, is reprised from the first movie.

But this is Carmina's film. Foul-mouthed, corporeal, slow moving and sharp-witted, she is rarely without a cigarette in her hand (with a cinema-shuddering cough to accompany it) which indeed leads to an unnecessary note of sentimentality over the last few minutes.

She is playing herself for someone who knows her intimately, and who's thus able to satisfyingly nuance her. Her wits are quick, her attitude is no nonsense as the result of a lifetime of struggle, and she is far from a paradigm of virtue, controlling every situation in which she finds herself. "I never lie," Carmina lowers threateningly at Maria. "When I say something, it becomes true". It's a dark, complex utterance that explains much of the force of her character -- and much of the force of a film which is all her own.

The comedy is vulgar, sometimes to the point of offensiveness. The only limits on what these women are prepared to discuss are set by the presence of men, and in one nicely observed moment during Antonio's wake, the women suddenly become tongue-tied when one of Antonio's friends sits down next to them. Some of the humor will be over the heads of non-Spanish audiences: the fact that Carmina's parrot is named after Luis Barcenas, the disgraced former treasurer of the Spain's ruling political party, for examplfae.

Things don't work so well when they move out of the house, during for example one over-extended and pointless scene in which Carmina and Maria become convinced that someone has broken into Maria's beauty salon. But it does end up with Carmina riding magnificently along on the back of her son's motor bike, topless and wearing sunglasses - another Almodovar allusion which suggests that Leon could be trying to fill the gap left in Spanish culture when the Oscar-winning Manchegan abandoned broad comedy for melodrama.

Carmina is mostly shot within the few square meters of her home, and director of photography Juan Gonzalez spends a lot of time focusing on the telling details which bring the space alive. Ana Alvarez's editing is key to keeping this largely static, conversation-based piece moving briskly along..

From: http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/carmina-amen-carmina-y-amen-690632

HOME

BFI Film Forever
Awarding funds from The National Lottery®

¡viva!

¡Viva! Spanish & Latin American Festival is presented by HOME, Manchester, with the support of the BFI Film Festival Fund, awarding funds from The National Lottery, the Instituto Cervantes (Manchester) and the Office for Cultural and Scientific Affairs, Embassy of Spain in the UK.