The Ciambra

Director: Jonas Carpignano
Country: Italy
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A review by David Rooney for *The Hollywood Reporter:*

One of the more memorable peripheral characters lifted from reality in Jonas Carpignano's humanistic and timely plunge into the European refugee crisis, Mediterranea, was Pio Amato, a crafty preteen operator from a Romani family on the edges of a Calabrian town called Gioia Tauro. Already the subject of an identically titled short film, this magnetic Dickensian hustler now gets a richly contextualized feature portrait in A Ciambra, a coming-of-age drama with a stealthy emotional charge that further enhances the writer-director's reputation as a gifted practitioner of Italian neo-neorealism.

Executive producer Martin Scorsese's name should help the film secure distribution, but its greatest asset by far is the fascinating specificity of this snapshot of a transitional period in life common to all cultures. Pio was 14 when the film was made, on the precipice of premature adulthood. As dramatized with unerring authenticity by Carpignano using nuggets of the boy's own experience, he's impatient to grow up and assert his masculinity. But he's also somewhat regretful about leaving behind the innocence of childhood, particularly after he gets a stinging taste of failure, humiliation and moral compromise.

Premiering in the Directors' Fortnight at Cannes, the movie, at two hours, is overlong for a work so loosely observational and almost non-narrative in its documentary-style slice of life. But the subject matter keeps it engrossing, as does Carpignano's masterful ability to coax nuanced, unselfconscious characterizations out of untrained actors essentially playing versions of themselves. That includes some 15 members of the fractious but fiercely loyal and loving Amato clan, dominated by Pio's mother Iolanda, a tough matriarch cut from the classic mold.

The movie is a companion piece to Mediterranea, Carpignano's feature debut, but also a continuation. It zooms in on another faction of the same cluster of communities around the quarter that supplies the title, where gypsy families, the Italians who regard them as inferiors, and North Africans, who have even less acknowledged visibility, live in relatively close proximity. Their interactions are often uneasy, though one of the more tender threads in the story — as well as the source of its most searing conflict — is Pio's friendship with Ayiva (Koudous Seihon), a migrant from Burkina Faso first encountered in the 2015 film.

Pio's role model, however, is his older brother Cosimo (Damiano Amato), who brings in cash via car theft and burglaries, and answers to a local Italian crime ring. Given that almost all the adult male Amatos either are in prison or under house arrest at some point in the movie, it's clear that low-level crime is a given within the group's social fabric, right down to them piggybacking on utility cables to avoid electrical bills.

But arguably the most essential quality of Carpignano's filmmaking is the absence of judgment. The director's gaze could perhaps best be described as compassionate detachment. Nowhere in the film is there any attempt to gloss over the family's poverty, and the near-slum-like conditions in which they live are made only mildly less brutal by the spirited resilience of the young kids. The family relationships are not always entirely clear, but one under-10 boy is a particular scene-stealer, eagerly embracing cigarettes to set him on the path to manhood.

Smoking like a chimney and chugging back beers with the older guys, Pio spends much of his time looking for ways to prove his street smarts to Cosimo, who continues to treat him like a kid. He steals luggage off passenger trains just prior to their departure and resells anything of value he finds, usually through Ayiva. After being excluded from a robbery plan by Cosimo and his cronies, he follows along on a moped, creating a diversion when law enforcement arrives by driving off in the carabinieri vehicle and tossing the keys. Without hammering the point, Carpignano makes it clear that Pio is uneducated, but equipped with savvy and survival skills.

While the movie ambles along for too long without much in the way of structure, it's beautifully punctuated by poignant interludes in which Pio sees visions of his grandfather as a young man with his mottled gray horse. That echo of the Romanis' nomadic history is fortified in the words of the now-doddery old man in a rare moment of lucidity before his death, when he recalls days of complete freedom, with no bosses. The solemn funeral sequence also plays in stirring contrast to the noise and chaos that normally prevail over the family scenes.

Editor Affonso Goncalves establishes the jumpy rhythms of the Amatos' lives while keeping Pio firmly at the center. The film gains considerable momentum in the latter action, when he makes the mistake of robbing the home of a rich Italian with clout and shady connections, and is forced to deal with his family's disapproval when he's caught. More wrenchingly, Pio faces tough choices when Cosimo informs him of a plan to rob Ayiva's storeroom. The boy's sexual awakening could perhaps have been a more substantially integrated thread, but overall, Pio's accelerated passage from adolescence to adulthood is depicted with moving honesty and sensitivity.

It helps that the principal subject, with his lean physical presence and probing eyes, is such a natural in front of the camera, providing crucial windows to the vulnerability showing through the increasing cracks in his self-possessed veneer. The narrowness of his options is conveyed as a simple fact, without commentary. Other vital contributions come from Iolanda Amato, who comes across as a hard-ass with heart, and Seihon, who enhances the soulful depths and integrity that we saw in Ayiva in Mediterranea.

The film's look strikes a fine balance between sharp and scrappy, especially in the many moody night scenes with low-level, murky lighting. Cinematographer Tim Curtin's handheld camerawork is highly effective when it moves in close on Pio, searching his face for access to everything his alert young mind is processing. Invaluable texture is provided also by Dan Romer's score, which is bold and dynamic but used with judicious economy. With his shorts and two features, Carpignano is building an impressively cohesive gallery of outsider portraits. A Ciambra should continue to expand his audience.

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