

Movies

A Subtle Passion For Good

For his directorial debut, John Malkovich makes a meticulous, absorbing movie about a terrorist

By RICHARD SCHICKEL

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Dead dogs hang from the lampposts in the capital of a mythical South American country. Attached to their carcasses are literate, even ironic, signs announcing a pre-revolutionary terrorist campaign directed at the corrupt and fascist local regime. An honest, weary cop, Augustin Rejas (Javier Bardem), is assigned to investigate. In particular, he must track down "Ezequiel," in whose name the increasingly violent terrorist campaign is being prosecuted.

Rejas' methods are patient and plodding and based on those actually used to peacefully apprehend Abimael Guzman, leader of Peru's Shining Path movement a decade ago. *The Dancer Upstairs* is also, in its way, patient and plodding--but as realized by John Malkovich, in his directorial debut, utterly absorbing. It is really quite wonderful, in the age of hyperkinetic thrillers, to encounter a movie that takes the time to record the play of thought and emotion in its characters, to let their conflicts develop in a natural and unforced way.

Bardem, who was nominated for an Oscar in a very different kind of role in 2000's *Before Night Falls*, is particularly good at letting ideas seem to overtake him, even as his bosses press him for quick solutions. It's the same with the largest invention imposed by screenwriter Nicholas Shakespeare, adapting his own novel, on his historical material. That's the connection that begins to develop between Rejas and Yolanda, the eponymous dancer upstairs (played by the heartbreakingly beautiful Laura Morante). She is his daughter's dance teacher, and while picking up his daughter after lessons, he begins to sense something wistful and possibly yearning in Yolanda, something that contrasts seductively with the brisk, bourgeois nature of his wife. It's all very tentative, even wary, and a good thing too, since Yolanda turns out to be not at all what she seems, politically speaking.

Malkovich and Shakespeare do not make a big melodramatic point about that. Rather, her character becomes emblematic of the fluidity and confusions of a country veering toward chaos, a place where sudden death and plain decency constantly brush against, even interpenetrate, each other.

The film does not side with the terrorists; in their heedless passion, they take many innocent lives. But it does not apologize for the regime either; it is too cynical, too casually cruel for sympathy. If the film sides with anyone, it is with people like Rejas, who defines his duties narrowly, who insists on living a life free of ideological imperatives and who solves the terrible case assigned to him without spilling any additional blood. You could perhaps say *The Dancer Upstairs* is passionately evolutionary rather than revolutionary in its politics. In a time like ours, when so many are braying their political certainties, that may make this musing, generally antidramatic movie a tough sell. But don't be misled by the balance, reason and quietness of its tone. You get the feeling that Malkovich & Co. have found their own shining path and that their belief in it, though subtly stated, is proudly held.

--By Richard Schickel

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