



CHESTER FILM SOCIETY PRESENTS:

SOLAS

2000 SPAIN 97 MINUTES

DIRECTED BY BENITO ZAMBRANO

STARRING MARIA GALIANA, ANA FERNANDEZ

Preceded by a short.

When Benito Zambrano's protagonist Maria (Ana Fernandez) sees her mother on the street, gazing at her through the window of a bar, it isn't being drunk that shames her. It's the love in her mother's eyes. Maria, who is single, pregnant and unemployed, grudgingly allows her mother (Maria Galiana) to stay with her while her father (Paco De Osca) is in the hospital. *Solas* is the story of how her mother's love slowly wears away at the bitterness Maria feels toward both her parents—her father for his drunkenness and his abuse of the family, and her mother for not leaving him.

A subtitle translates 'Solas' as the Spanish word for 'alone,' leading you to believe that the title refers to Maria, since the story is told from her point of view. However, 'solas' actually means 'they're alone'—it's the feminine plural. Both Maria and her mother are victims of emotional abandonment, in loveless relationships with men, Maria with her boyfriend Juan (Juan Fernandez), and Mother with her abusive husband. In this debut masterpiece, Zambrano illustrates the sort of psychological truth we take for granted but which movies rarely depict with such simplicity—we often repeat our parents' mistakes.

Located in a squalid quarter of an unnamed Spanish city, Maria's apartment is barely furnished; she subsists, mostly on alcohol, on the verge of poverty. Mother explains to an elderly neighbor that Maria was an intelligent child, but her father was old-fashioned and didn't believe in educating his daughters. After her mother leaves, Maria, still contemplating an abortion, tells the neighbor that she's afraid she would abuse her child, as her father abused her. In response, the neighbor makes Maria an unusual offer that assuages his own loneliness and that allows Maria to realize herself in a way that she could never have imagined before her mother's visit.

Zambrano's visual style is an exquisite expression of his characters' desolation. The camera is unusually still, often

lingering after the actors have left the frame, drawing attention to the sparse interior of Maria's apartment, and the distance the women keep between them. Characters gaze at one another through windows, and they wait at open doors. In the hospital, under the harsh, fluorescent lights, emotional distances are even more apparent. Mother smiles to herself, recalling a conversation with Maria's elderly neighbor, oblivious to her husband's stares, and Maria reads a magazine while her father bristles at her presence.

In *Solas*, Spanish-speaking audiences will recognize the distinctive Andalusian accent of the actors, the only hint of the story's setting in Southern Spain. The Andalusians are known for their strong emotions and their gypsy music, yet there's no romance in Zambrano's depiction of the city or its people. Maria's story is hardly triumphant. It's about the freedom you gain when you finally come to terms with your past. Mother did, and it's what allows her to shrug off her husband's insults, heal her daughter's anger, and respond to the affection offered by Maria's elderly neighbor. At first, Maria refuses to let go of her past because it would mean letting go of her bitterness, and without that she wouldn't recognize herself. When Maria agrees to be godmother to her niece, in response to her mother's pleas, everything changes. She accepts the present. She thinks about the child she's carrying, about her mother's life and her own, and about the unusual arrangement she'd make with her neighbour. It is a cosmic shift on a human scale—it's the beginning of Maria's liberation.

Every one of Zambrano's characters tugs at the dark places within, where cruelty or violence have left their mark. Maria's bitterness is actually a healing tonic, an expression of universal grief, and her pregnancy represents the hope that relief is near. In the end, Maria's choices promise that old patterns can be broken, that we are all somehow free to choose happiness.

Maria Garcia Film Journal International.

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