



CHESTER FILM SOCIETY PRESENTS:

NIGHT OF THE SUNFLOWERS

2006 Spain/France/Portugal 118 mins

Directed by Jorge Sanchez-Cabezudo

Starring Carmelo Gomez, Walter Vidarte, Manuel Moron

Jorge Sanchez-Cabezudo finds an unlikely home for film noir in the forgotten hinterlands of the Spanish interior with his gripping, assured debut "The Night of the Sunflowers." A dark, substantial plotline parceled out over six increasingly tantalizing episodes and an intimate knowledge of the dynamics of Spanish rural life are the twin foundations for a beguiling piece with a shot at welding Spanish concerns to a U.S. genre. At home, word of mouth has generated unexpectedly decent B.O. for an item that should take root at fests and has the kind of cult appeal that could see it blossom offshore.

In the opening episode, "Motel Man," a vacuum cleaner salesman (sublimely creepy Manuel Moron) rapes Gabi (Judith Diakhate) in an isolated wooded spot as she awaits the arrival of husband Esteban (Carmelo Gomez) and his assistant Pedro (Mariano Alameda), who have traveled to the area to investigate the discovery of a new cave.

Infuriated upon finding Gabi in a state of shock, Esteban and Pedro go in search of the rapist, whom the hysterical Gabi misidentifies as Cecilio (Cesareo Estebanez), one of the two inhabitants of a nearby almost-abandoned pueblo. In a horrifyingly drawn-out scene, Cecilio is accidentally killed.

Tomas (Vicente Romero) is a young civil guard working under Amadeo (Celso Bugallo), to whose daughter Raquel (Nuria Mencia) he is engaged. Desperate to escape the stultifying rural future that awaits him, Tomas sees the arrival of the three panicking outsiders as an opportunity. Why deliver justice, he wonders, if nobody is seeking it?

But the wily Amadeo smells a rat, and dedicates much of the remainder of the film to unearthing the awful truth.

Pic is structured so that a different character is to the

fore in each of the six episodes, meaning the plentiful thrills are appropriately distributed. Psychological motivation is carefully positioned early on, so that by the time of the killing, the narrative hooks are in, with smart pacing maintaining the pic's grip to the strangely muted night-time finale. Script occasionally strains, however, in seeking to bring its multiple narratives to a tidy conclusion.

Thesps are superb, though Moron (currently in danger of being stereotyped as the dangerous, perspiring little man) stands out, as do the solid Gomez, delivering his finest perf in years, and the rough-hewn Bugallo (from "The Sea Inside"), as the slow-moving, quick-minded old fox of a cop who'll do anything to protect his daughter's honor.

TVs are often on in the background, a reminder that this is an area forgotten, as one character says, by the news. Violence is unflinchingly portrayed, appropriately for a pic that explores the suspension of civilized moral standards. Atmospherics are top notch, with lensing creating a claustrophobic air more normally associated with the mean streets of New York than with old Castile. Threaded through the action is a bitter view of rural Spanish life rarely matched since Mario Camus' '80's brutal backwoods classic "The Holy Innocents."

Jonathan Holland

Variety

VICKY CRISTINA BARCELONA, POSTPONED DUE TO THE ADVERSE WEATER IN JANUARY, WILL NOW BE SHOWN AT THE STEAM MILL ON 4TH MARCH AT THE STEAM MILL. CFS MEMBERS, PLEASE BRING YOUR MEMBERSHIP CARDS FOR FREE ADMITTANCE.

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