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FILM REVIEWS

Southern District -- Film Review

By James Greenberg, January 29, 2010 08:21 ET



"Southern District"

conventional audience, but the film should be welcome on the festival circuit and arty outlets.

Bottom Line: Decline of the Bolivian bourgeoisie is deliberately paced, but its innovative form illuminates content.

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PARK CITY -- The crumbling of the aristocracy in his native Bolivia is the subject of writer/director Juan Carlos Valdivia's entrancing "Southern District." Stylistically innovative, the film builds on the details of daily life to compose its portrait of a society in flux. Experimental form will prove challenging for a

Nuances of the Bolivian culture may be lost on American moviegoers, but the larger concerns are universal. Valdivia doesn't venture outside of the upper crust palatial home in La Paz. The story is self-contained, just like the people it's about, but the way it's told is like a precisely designed mathematical equation. Aided greatly by cinematographer Paul de Lumen, Valdivia sets up his shots so the cameras are constantly in motion, circling the characters living in their bubble of privilege. Strategically placed mirrors and reflective surfaces all over the house empathize how self-absorbed the people in this world are.

At the top of the food chain is Carola (Ninon Del Castillo), the matriarch of the family. Orbiting around her are her libidinous son Patricio (Juan Pablo Koria), rebellious daughter Bernarda (Mariana Vargas) and young son (Nicolas Fernandez). As a counterpoint, also living in villa are two Aymara Indians, Wilson (Pascual Loayza), the butler, chef and housekeeper, and Marcelina (Viviana Condori), the gardener.

The once-grand and now threadbare house with its lush grounds, designed by artist Perez Alcala and outfitted by production designer Joachin Sanchez, also plays an important role in this domestic drama. Day by day, the viewer gets to live with these people as they complacently hold on to their fading glory. Patricio seems to have sex around the clock with his gorgeous girlfriend (Luisa De Urioste) while Bernarda has a lesbian fling with her schoolmate (Glenda Rodriguez). Their younger brother Andres, who is dark-haired and almost seems to be from another family, escapes to the tiled roof of the house where he talks to his imaginary friend named Spielberg.

But it's Carola who rules the roost with a stern will and often-foul temper as she exerts her power on those around her. Going about her business as if nothing has changed, she refuses to acknowledge her growing debt as her circle of influence closes in on her. Interestingly, her ex-husband doesn't make an appearance and the only man in the house is the servant Wilson, who plays an intricate role in their lives but doesn't figure in the social strata.

The characters are neither likable nor totally evil, and Valdivia displays both compassion and contempt for a bourgeois society he seems to know intimately. None of these people are inherently interesting but they become interesting largely by spending so much time in close quarters with them. Not much happens, but as outsiders the audience gets to see the slow decline of a privileged way of life, something these people can't see for themselves.

What makes the film unusual and sometimes fascinating, despite its glacial pace, in the specificity of time and place Valdivia creates. The director and his team have managed to get inside the very fabric of lives as they are unraveling.

Venue: Sundance Film Festival

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 Director: Juan Carlos Valdivia
 Writer: Juan Carlos Valdivia
 Producer: Gabriela Maire
 Director of photography: Paul de Lumen
 Production designer: Joachin Sanchez
 Music: Cergio Prudencio
 Costumes: Melany Zuazo, Roxana Toledo
 Editor: Ivan Layme
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 No rating, 109 minutes

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