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***En la Ciudad de Sylvia* at the 2008 Wisconsin Film Festival**

David Medaris on Monday 04/07/2008 11:00 am , (5) Recommendations

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En la Ciudad de Sylvia lingers in the mind much as the static camera perspectives favored by director José Luis Guerin linger on a scene after the relevant narrative action has concluded. Enjoying its Midwest premiere Sunday morning at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, *En la Ciudad* is a movie that pulls you in with limited dialog, its reliance on visual storytelling and an intriguing insistence on taking its sweet time to reveal what it is about.

Depending on how receptive you are to shaggy-dog stories that hang on the thinnest of premises, you will come away either adoring or despising *En la Ciudad*. My own reactions are favorable, in part because of Guerin's courage in anchoring his cameras and allowing them to linger on settings while people walk into and through and out of the frame, in part because those settings -- narrow cobbled streets, outdoor cafes, breezy parks and pedestrian promenades -- are so gorgeous and evocatively European, in part because in taking its time to reveal itself, it is calming and relaxing to savor.

The premise is this: A young 20-something artist, portrayed by Xavier Lafitte, is sitting at a cafe in Strasbourg, sketching portraits in his notebook. This goes on for some time, drawing the audience into the perspective of the artist, inviting us to see what he sees in the way that he sees it. We overhear snippets of background conversation, observe people in conversation at a distance, cast our eyes on faces lost in placid contemplation or focused on writing or reading, and others that are bemused, or careworn or burdened with fatigue.

The young artist then notices a woman and a flash of uncertain recognition crosses his face. Could it be...? He rises from his chair, grabs his sketchbook and shoulderbag, scatters some coins on the cafe table (knocking over what remains in his beer glass) and we are off in pursuit, following the woman who may or may not be familiar. He follows her at a distance, keeping us at bay, at one point losing her around a corner but at another moment drawing close enough to call out, "Sylvie?" If she hears, she acknowledges neither recognition of the name nor awareness of the person speaking it. The object of the young artist's uncertain recognition is portrayed by the Pilar López de Ayala, winner of numerous awards including a Goya (Spain's equivalent to the Oscar) for best actress in 2001's *Juana de Loca*. Here, she carries herself with the enigmatic grace of a youthful Nathalie Baye.

I won't hint at the resolution except to say that I think it is handled quite well, and justifies the wait. Several comments overheard outside the theater after the screening differed enough from my own thoughts to suggest reactions among other members of the Wisconsin Film Festival lacked consensus. There's nothing wrong with a lack of consensus about a movie. I found *En la Ciudad* intriguing, and was captivated.

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