


the
notes

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2015

latest news
The programme for next season is steadily taking shape. Sci-fi, Middle East and 1950s noir classics are all in the longlist mix: who knows what wonderful result our bake-off will yield soon?
Another silent classic is also pencilled in for the Cathedral at some point in the next few months, but we are in their hands.
Scandi-noir of a sort next month: don't miss it.

Blancanieves

Pablo Berger,
Spain 2012

- Daniel Giménez Cacho**
..... Antonio Villalta
- Ramón Barea** Don Martín
- Inma Cuesta** Carmen de Triana
- Ángela Molina** Doña Concha
- Ignacio Mateos** ... Fotógrafo plaza
- Maribel Verdú** Encarna
- Carmen Belloch**
..... Enfermera mayor
- Teresa Soria Ruano**
..... Enfermera joven
- Sofía Oria** Carmencita
- Lito y Tomás** Gallo Pepe
- Pere Ponce** Genaro
- Carmen Segarra** Milagros
- Pep Ferrer** Pintor
- Manel Castillejos**
..... Fotógrafo entierro
- Macarena García**
..... Carmen / Blancanieves



If we look through the list of Oscar-nominated films this year, it is difficult to find one with a strong female lead: it is dominated by macho actors playing macho roles in such films as *Foxcatcher*, *Whiplash* and *American Sniper*. Where are those strong females that filled the screens with their feisty heroines in the 50's? Is it only in *animés* that women are allowed to be independent spirits? Also, looking

at the narratives in these films it is obvious that few directors today are willing to take risks on that level. Film-makers would prefer the safety net of endless prequels and sequels to the risk of trying something new.

The tales of the Brothers Grimm or the stories of *The Thousand and One*

Nights thrill us with their enchantment, eroticism, violence and drama. The story of Snow White is one of the best-known in the western canon; but which version do you know: the Brothers Grimm fairy tale, the Disney film version, or the Pantomime version you watched each Christmas?

The director, Pablo Berger, recalls seeing black & white silent films as a young man (including Stroheim's *Greed*, [USA 1925], accompanied by a live orchestra), and being entranced by them. The idea of doing a modern B & W silent film obsessed him for years, but while he was working on the story-line for *Blancanieves*, he learned of the release of *The Artist* (2011) and almost gave up the project. Whereas *The Artist* opts for a tongue-in-cheek approach to the silent era (and cheats!), *Blancanieves* owes more to Murnau and Gance, Hitchcock and David Lynch.

Telling such a well-known story presents a challenge: how closely do you follow the original? In what period do you choose to set it? And the challenge of using B & W and silent mode would be sufficient in itself. When 'talkies' were first introduced, the technology did not meet with universal approval (we remember the scene in *Singing in the Rain*). Some critics thought that 'Kinema' was essentially a visual art form and its magnetism would be destroyed by dialogue; certainly, many films made subsequently bore this out, and the

action and cinematography became much more stilted. Directors became lazy and relied on speech to express what they were unable to express through the power of the image.

In this playful interpretation of the story the magic mirror is replaced by an *Hola*-type magazine; and Snow White is not a housekeeper, but a *torero*, who is given her name – after the Brother Grimm heroine – by the bullfighting dwarves who find her, nearly dead and suffering from memory loss. However, you will recognise the poisoned apple and the glass coffin and, like many fairy tales, it can be scary in parts. The ending, in true modern fashion, is left ambiguous; you read it how you will.

Berger chose to set his version in the 1920's, in the recognisable location of Seville. But to be true to the fairy tale he had to interlace the real with the unreal, to produce something poetic and magical within an everyday context. To add to the challenge, he made his dwarves *toreros* and, as he said, bulls do not follow the script! Another element of his risk-taking – and ambition – was to give the role of the young *Blancanieves* to Sofía

Oria, who had not acted before, but who gives an amazing performance, as does the older *Blancanieves*, Macarena García. However, it is the wicked stepmother, played with relish by Maribel Verdú (*Pan's Labyrinth* and *Y Tu Mamá También*) who steals the show. She is ably backed up by Angela Molina (*That Obscure Object of Desire*) as the grandmother, and Daniel Giménez Cacho (*Bad Education*).

The various threads of the narrative are held together by the score, by Alfonso de Villalonga, in which orchestral and chamber music segue seamlessly into flamenco and pasodoble, and bridge the 1920's and today. "Music must help us in the journey of time" he said.

The film received many awards in Spain, and Peter Bradshaw in the *Guardian* gave it a 5-star rating.

Angela Errigo wrote:

"For all its detailed period re-creation, this is no dispassionate academic exercise. It's an immersive, sensory, highly emotional experience transporting viewers into the dark, collective consciousness of once upon a time".

““One day I was in the Teatro Victoria Eugenia, a big, lovely old theatre, and saw Eric Von Stroheim's *Greed*, with Carl Davis directing a symphony orchestra. It was the first time I saw a silent film, and it blew my mind. From that moment silent cinema became an obsession. And when I became a director, it was always my intention to make one myself.”

The tide turned when a friend started a new production company, and pledged to get *Blancanieves* made. After another four years the €5m budget was in place – some from France (confirming the Gallic nous in this regard), none of it from Spain.

The result is every bit the spectacle that Berger had always imagined. Transposing the Brothers Grimm to 1920s Spain, he doffs his montera not only to European silent cinema of the period, but to bullfighting and flamenco, with an atmospheric Gothic melodrama that has lashings of humour – mostly provided by Maribel Verdú as the social-climbing evil stepmother with a penchant for S&M – bags of invention, and an expressive, flamenco-inflected

score by Alfonso de Villalonga.

"I think a movie's like a paella," he laughs, "you put all of your obsessions in there. But the first idea came with a photo, of bullfighting dwarves, which I saw in this amazing book, *España Oculta*. Christina Garcia Roderó spent 15 years travelling around villages in Spain, photographing fiestas. These dwarves were looking at me, because they were looking straight at the camera, and somehow I imagined placing a young woman amongst them, a teenager dressed as a bullfighter, and she's like Snow White. That was it. Then I started pulling the strings."

While this passionate, silver-haired 49-year-old has been remarkably open to speaking about *The Artist*, he rightly points out that "you never compare two colour, sound films" for simply sharing those fundamental characteristics, adding that the principle thing that he and Hazanavicius shared – unlike, say, Guy Maddin, who's been making wonderful silent films for years – was the desire to seduce a mainstream audience.

Guardian



NEXT MONTH'S FILM IS
**THE MATCH FACTORY
GIRL** (Aki Kaurismäki,
Finland 1990)
Monday 16 March

www.elyfilmsociety.com

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