

## *Noviembre*

*November* is the best film that I saw at this year's Seattle International Film Festival. The only thing unfortunate about this film is that it will never find a mainstream audience in the U.S., and will be seen by only a handful of movie folks on the festival circuit. The questions *November* raises about the intersection of art, politics and financial interests are extremely important, especially post 9-11, and the film deals with each deftly and chillingly.

*November* tells the story of Alfredo, an acting student intent on transforming the status quo of theater productions. Driven by the connection his homemade puppets make with his handicapped brother, Alfredo drops out of acting school, preferring the immediate and improvisational (and as we quickly see, confrontational) nature of acting without boundaries on the streets of Madrid to the standard theater demarcations separating performers and audience. A group of other dropouts soon join him and the street performance group "November" is born. The actors quickly establish a strict code of conduct for their performances that reminds one of a religious rite or a socialist creed. The foundation of their code is that they will take no funds, not even to cover basic costs, for their performances.

The troop puts on a variety of shows, all driven by the passionate intensity, vision and charisma of Alfredo, played wonderfully by Oscar Jaenada (who stands out from an otherwise marvelous cast). Each performance subsequently escalates, in terms of viewer ship, intensity and social critique, and soon several group members are arrested. Refusing to be hindered by social constraints, the group continues to push the limits of the permissible, eventually staging a mock assassination on a street in downtown Madrid. This draws further police attention and the group is subsequently banned from street performance.

Soon a carnival owner looking to cash in on their notoriety approaches them. The only stipulation is that the group must receive payment for their performances. Because he's paying, the owner brings expectations to the show, and the tension between the group's previous free artistic integrity is thrown into stark contrast with being indebted to money and the wishes of those behind it. The group disbands after the carnival performance, only to be brought back together by Alfredo for the grand finale: a staging at the Madrid Royal Theater, to be undertaken midway through a professional performance by the Theater's troop. In one of the most memorable, passionate and heart-rending endings I've seen we are shown what art can be, and then we are violently shown the place it is often relegated to once it suffers under the constraints of money, social requirements, security and fear.

Writers Acheró and Frederico Manas deserve tremendous praise for making a movie that challenges viewers to question the relationships between artistic integrity, financial pressures and societal expectations. To their credit this is

achieved while maintaining an engaging film that never falls prey to overt didacticism. Wonderful metaphors and images abound, from Alfredo's personification of art struggling to maintain its integrity to the group's performance of a passion sequence upon accepting payment for their services.

The passage of time is fascinating: the documentary style in which it is shot juxtaposes the young actors, performing in the late 90's and early 00's, with their middle-aged selves reminiscing on their experiences: the distance created by this jumping of time adds a degree of sympathy and compassion to our experiences of the young actors' feverish performances. Further, the group's taking the name "November" for its association with the revolution that overthrew Franco's regime (which actually occurred in October, making this acting group the new or next revolution) contrasts nicely with the last scene set in September 2001. In this all too tangible climax art is sacrificed for "security purposes," a healthy reminder of the perils of those who voice opposition post 9-11.

Given the variety of interests involved, directly and indirectly, in the creation of contemporary film, *November* is a welcome admonition against the impact that corporations, advertising firms, marketing companies and political lobbyists have upon artistic creation (an all too relevant example of this is the ruckus surrounding *Fahrenheit 9/11*). *November* is a neo-Marxist's dream that challenges not just the what, but the how and for whom, art is made and transmitted.

The central concern revolves around the future of art. Can art be made that is sincere and vibrant, experiential and experienced, heterogeneous, capable of challenging social structures, able to inspire us to greater heights and comfort us in knowing that we're not alone? Or is the future of art, by its unavoidable fact of being created in the human realm of competition, fear, corporate and individual avarice, market swings and political hegemony, destined always to be a selling out; the making of a packageable product whose merits are measured either only by those who can afford to be in the know, or on the basis of the quantity of those who consume it? Those who are troubled by such questions are indebted to the makers of *November* for not only challenging us, but for demonstrating, via the film itself, the only honest answer to both questions. Yes.