



Biutiful

Director: Alejandro González
Iñárritu

Country: Mexico/Spain

Date: 2010



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A review by Kirk Honeycutt for *The Hollywood Reporter*:



Some scenes are absolutely wrenching to behold. Others hit home with a punch to the solar plexus. Spain -- and Barcelona to be specific -- has beckoned forth the wistful poet in the Mexican-born filmmaker. His response to this summons is a film that, while about death, is teeming with life in all its tangled messiness. More than any of the director's previous films including "Babel" and "21 Grams," which came loaded with star power, "Biutiful" is destined for the art house. There it should enjoy a warm reception since its only star, Javier Bardem, delivers a knockout performance as a hero whose last days are detailed with Joycean elan, filled with ambiguity, contradictions and lyricism. "Biutiful" is the story of Uxbal, played by Bardem. He is a businessman of the underworld, yet a spiritually sensitive man responsible for the welfare of far too many living people and in contact with the souls of the dead. Most of all, he is a father.

Since his estranged wife Marambra (Maricel Alvarez) is a manic-depressive libertine, he has custody of his two young children. He lives in the Santa Coloma enclave of Barcelona, a neighborhood jammed with immigrants, many illegal, from Senegal, China, Romania and elsewhere. Uxbal has his fingers in many illicit trades, from importing illegal Chinese workers to piracy and supplying goods to street peddlers. Grieving relatives call him in to help ease the transition of loved ones to the next life since he can communicate with recently freed souls. Then Uxbal discovers he is dying of cancer. The diagnosis liberates him from his quotidian life, giving him at once greater insight and greater pain. He is a good man yet best intentions are not enough. Even his attempts to help the immigrants he watches over go tragically wrong. Pressure comes from everywhere, from his wife, who so desperately wants to rejoin her family and reclaim a maternal role that ill suits her, to the Chinese sweatshop workers he protects, the cop he pays off and a Senegalese mother (Diaryatou Daff) whose husband has been deported.

Inarritu, who wrote the script with Amando Bo and Nicolas Giacobone, doesn't attempt to explain everything about his protagonist. It's up to the viewer to imagine how and why he chose such a life and who all the people in it are. Some are wise; others foolish. His children are often bewildered. Only the daughter senses, finally, that their father will leave them soon. A real estate development forces Uxbal and his hedonistic brother (Eduard Fernandez) to disinter the remains of the father they never knew. In viewing the corpse, long ago embalmed in Mexico where the young man had fled Franco's killing machine, Uxbal meditates on the loss of a father's love and what that meant for him -- and will mean for his own children.

Bardem struggles to reconcile his impending departure with so much unfinished business and unalloyed guilt. Is this a punishment? Has he failed love so badly? Inarritu captures his hero's state of mind and the subjective impact of events in his final days in the film's impressionistic storytelling. Gustavo Santaolalla's haunting music, from complex orchestrations to the melody in a single guitar, filters through the narrative, catching the emotions that bear down on Uxbal. Cinematographer Rodrigo Prieto paints Barcelona, in sunlight and shadows, as a city struggling with its many tragedies. "Biutiful" will require several viewings for the film to yield a complete portrait of its mysterious, flawed hero. Because for all the complexity of his previous films, with fractured, multiple narratives and an array of international characters, this in many ways is Inarritu's most intricate study yet of the human condition.

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