



Mia Madre

Director: Nanni Moretti
Country: Italy
Date: 2015

A review by Mark Kermode for The Guardian:

Italian tragicomic auteur Nanni Moretti approached the subject of his own mortality in 1993's international breakthrough feature *Caro diario* (Dear Diary), which documented, among other things, his all too real encounter with cancer. In his most celebrated feature, the 2001 Palme d'Or winner *La stanza del figlio* (The Son's Room), he dealt superbly with parental bereavement and mourning. Now, in *Mia Madre*, he focuses on the impending loss of a mother, drawing heavily upon personal experience (Moretti's own mother Agata died while he was completing 2011's *Habemus Papam/We Have a Pope*), but also keeping enough distance from his subject to achieve a sense of universality. The beautifully observed and delicately balanced result is a sublimely modulated blend of laughter and tears, a film that cuts to the very heart of profound personal loss without ever losing sight of the fact that life, in all its chaotic comedy, carries on regardless. For my money, it's Moretti's most satisfying film to date, a richly mature work that brings together themes – life, death, love, film-making – that have haunted his entire career.



At the heart of *Mia Madre* is a trio of women: Livia (Beatrice Mancini), a teenager who has dealt with heartache unnoticed by her mother; Ada (Giulia Lazzarini), a grandmother hospitalised by an illness which is inexorably undermining her physical and mental strength; and Margherita, a film-maker overwhelmed by personal and professional pressures, brilliantly played by Margherita Buy in a performance worthy of Oscar nomination. It is upon Buy's shoulders that much of the drama rests as she attempts to complete a Ken Loach-style political drama,

“Noi siamo qui” (We Are Here), about the dignity of industrial action while coping with the decline of her mother and feared estrangement from her daughter. Juggling her time between the movie set, the hospital and the home, the doubt-racked Margherita drops in and out of focus, the film's fluid timeline mirroring the watery ebb and flow of her dreams, memories, and experiences. Meanwhile, Margherita's brother Giovanni (Moretti, significantly sidelining his own on-screen presence) simply steps away from work, taking a leave of absence to attend to his mother, but also to tend his own emotional wounds.

While the core subject matter may be painfully close to home (Agata's personal effects – books, clothes – appear in the film), there are belly laughs to be had, thanks largely to John Turturro in a spectacularly self-deprecating turn as fading American-Italian screen star Barry Huggins. Full of shouty stories about working with Kubrick (despite never actually appearing in his movies), Huggins is a class-A clown, unable to remember his lines, ill-versed in Italian pronunciation, and incapable of acting and driving at the same time – or maybe even separately. In *Noi siamo qui* he plays the



hateful boss firing factory workers, but can Margherita can get through the shoot without giving him his own marching orders? Never vain, Turturro relishes the opportunity to make a splendid mockery of his screen cachet (he brings international sales clout to both the real and fictional films), prattling about the itchiness of his moustache, praising and damning his director with equal vacuity. All the more poignant, then, to realise that the belligerent Barry, like the adored Ada, suffers from a failure of memory – that his flaws are a result of frailty too.

As for Margherita, her own shows of strength (her ex-boyfriend accuses her of emotional cruelty) fall apart as her mother's health fails, her on-set judgment increasingly clouded by the more significant dramas playing out within her family. There's something very pointed about the dogmatic sturdiness of the film she's working on while her personal life is in flux – as if order can only exist in stories. Well-rehearsed platitudes about audiences wanting something more than mere entertainment unravel as Margherita becomes her own harshest critic, her insistence that actors should “stand next to” their character (a Morettian tic) proving as baffling to her cast as the doctors' diagnoses are to her.

Moretti has said that he avoided watching Michael Haneke's *Amour* while preparing *Mia Madre*, and it's perhaps more helpful to think of Bergman or Woody Allen (he rewatched *Another Woman*) as possible tonal touchstones, although the latter comparison is arguably less a blessing than a curse. With precisely chosen music by (among others) Arvo Pärt and Jarvis Cocker, this is Moretti at his interpersonal best; intimate, empathetic and intensely humane.

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