



Mostly Martha

Director: Sandra Nettelbeck

Country: Germany

Date: 2001

A review by Doris Toumarkine for *Hollywood.com*:

Except for the occasional outburst with an overly fussy customer top German chef Martha Klein (Martina Gedeck) who rules the kitchen at an upscale Hamburg restaurant is a successful dedicated professional. But her personal life is another matter and the therapy sessions encouraged by her boss don't seem to be helping. Things only get worse when Martha is forced to care for her equally difficult 8-year-old niece Lina (Maxime Foerste) after the girl's mother dies in a car crash. Martha who sends a letter off to Lina's estranged father in Italy initially regards her new ward as a nuisance sometimes absent-mindedly forgetting



the child and failing to counter her rebelliousness. Martha is so emotionally cut off she also stonewalls the advances of her likable artist neighbor Sam and reacts with hostility when an Italian sous-chef Mario (Sergio Castellitto) is hired to assist her. The good-natured and patient Mario bonds with Lina who brings the pair together and eventually the two chefs begin a relationship. When Lina's father shows up to take his daughter back to Italy Martha finds herself reeling from the loss. She rudely dumps Mario and violently expresses her distaste with customers who can't seem to get their steak rare enough. At her low point Martha realizes she needs help and finally admitting this goes to the one person who can come through for her.

Gedeck as Martha brilliantly manages to do the impossible: she makes a most unpleasant ill-tempered arctic-cold and self-pitying character real and ultimately appealing and understandable even though the reasons for her character's high neuroses are suggested rather than obvious. Castellitto's Mario is just the counterpoint to Gedeck's Martha a warm loving tranquil man who is comfortable in his skin. Castellitto oozes Italian-ness without ever turning his character into a cliché. And Foerste as Lina is Martha's perfect foil and mirror image. She like all the film's characters is effortlessly convincing.

Writer/director Sandra Nettelbeck triumphs on all counts with her first feature. This film is beautifully constructed with a symmetry that allows for a few surprises and characters that are always engaging. The look of the film is sublime almost emitting intoxicating scents in the scenes in which food is prepared and savored. Nettelbeck never rushing to show her next plot point has the confidence to pace her story as if she wants to give her characters the room to find themselves. While delving into some nasty and gritty corners of human nature the filmmaker accords her film the same elegance and good taste she gives her heroine's rarified culinary sanctuary.

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