



Second Mother

Director: Anna Muylaert
Country: Brazil
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A review by Nikola Grozdanovic for *IndieWire*:

Like a Brazilian version of domestic whack-a-mole, as soon as one figure scuffles out of a room in Anna Muylaert's "The Second Mother," there's another that scuffles in, carrying with them new baggage full of locked contempt. The one doing the whacking is Val (Regina Case), a live-in housemaid working for wealthy middle-class parents Barbara (Karine Teles) and Dr. Jose Carlos (Lourenço Mutarelli), and their fragile teenage son, Fabinho (Michel Joecisas). House dynamics get shaken up when Val's estranged daughter, Jessica (Camila Mardila) — the most stubborn of the four moles — comes to stay with her mom in Sao Paulo, and turns out to be less accommodating than expected. The unwritten rules of class distinction get stepped on and broken in ways that make "The Second Mother" charmingly immersive. Thanks to its gradual minimalist nature, a dynamite lead performance, and Muylaert's sharp screenplay and sedative direction, the film has the fun, compulsive pull of the classic arcade game, with none of its obnoxious noises.

The opening scene by the pool, while Fabinho is still a bambino, reveals the kind of loving affection and attentive care he gets from Val in place of the busy, and absent, Barbara. It's a scene composed of two shots, with simple dialogue and the kind of every-day action (a young boy scared of the water, a woman's phone conversation with her daughter, etc.) that doesn't exactly spell out drama, but, when viewed in hindsight, every word spoken and action executed resonates with the overall themes of the film. It's a taste of Anna Muylaert's self-effacing grip on her story, which is the core reason of why "The Second Mother" works so well. Jumping to the present soon after, Val



is waking up a fifteen-year-old Fabinho for breakfast and complaining that "only bad people can do such things" as she puts back an empty ice-tray in the refrigerator. Her extroverted personality, eccentric mannerisms, and humorous out-loud thinking are captured by Muylaert's camera from deliberate distance, so that we can take her in completely while never forgetting the environment she's so beholden to: the kitchen, the hallway, her minuscule living quarters, and whichever other areas she cleans with attentive concern.

While she's constantly on the move, the other members of the household pop in and out. Dr. Carlos seems depressed and half-present, Fabinho has all the natural anxieties and worries of a teenager, and Barbara is the hard-working matriarch who tries to hide her disdain beneath a transparent surface of tolerance. Obvious in the way she scolds her son for smoking too much pot but allows him to smoke some anyway, or in the way she dismisses Val as casually as Val dismisses Maggie the dog. The happy facade slowly starts to peel when Val's daughter Jessica calls her mother up and announces her move to Sao Paulo, to take entrance-level exams for the same architecture school Fabinho wants to enroll in. As soon as Jessica arrives, it's clear that she doesn't have her mother's patient streak, and has little regard for "proper" decorum; when she sees that the guest house is twice the size of Val's room, she invites herself to sleep there instead. She eats ice-cream she's not supposed to, and starts spending a little bit too much time with Dr. Carlos, who used to be a painter and takes to Jessica's artistic spirit and sharp intelligence. Meanwhile, Barbara's prejudices start to bubble up to the surface, and Val keeps whacking to no avail.

"The Second Mother" quietly unravels its drama through ordinary happenings and the muted thunderclap of clashing personalities. Once Jessica enters the picture, the viewer is hooked until the final frame because of how seamlessly Muylaert weaves the oscillating emotions of each character. Whether it's Jessica and her intolerance for the way her mother is treated as a second-class citizen, the elitist Barbara and her growing impatience with everyone around her, the depressed Jose Carlos who sees in a young girl an unhealthy new beginning, or Val's guilt of being an absent mother paralleled with her motherly care for Fabinho; everyone is anchored by their own past and individualistic expectations. While it may all sound a bit too



somber, Muylaert gives the entire film a chirpy, oftentimes playful, attitude. Scenes of the three family members glued to their phones while Val clears the table, Val wrestling with a modern thermos and coffee-set (which factors in more symbolic ways than you'd expect), Barbara screaming Jose Carlos' name from across the room, or Val's delightfully inconspicuous conversations with her co-worker Edna (Helena Albergaria); all these serve to lighten up the tone of what could of been a much heavier-hitting piece on societal subjugation and severed family ties.

Together with Muylaert's excellent screenplay and unpretentious direction, Regina Case's performance is astonishing. Subtle yet physical, constrained in her social status yet liberated in her gesticulations, her Val is an energizer bunny that steals the heart of anyone watching. She goes through a whole range of emotions here, but it's the moments of tender loving – whether aimed at Jessica or Fabinho – that best exemplify how Case completely owns the character. Not unlike Catalina Saveedra's fabulous performance in the Chilean Oscar-nominated dramedy "The Maid," Case is the steel that reinforces her film's intelligent dialogue, swift narrative progression, and well-nourished characterization. Ultimately, the main source of power behind "The Second Mother" is found in its effortless skips between character study, family drama, and silent socioeconomic warfare. The final result is a gleaming cinematic treasure as heartwarming as the film's final reassuring smile.

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