

## 63rd Berlin International Film Festival—Part 2

***The Plague: The “loneliness, strength, humanity and beauty” of ordinary people***

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*This is the second in a series of articles on the recent Berlin film festival, the Berlinale, held February 7-17, 2013. Part 1 was posted February 21.*

*The Plague (La Plaga)* from Spain, directed by Neus Ballús, was one of the most satisfying films at the 63rd Berlinale. A mix of documentary and fiction, it features scenes from the daily lives of five people and their chance encounters.

As different as each person appears to be at the beginning, they have this in common: each is an ordinary worker seeking to earn a living with calm determination, condemned in part to isolation and loneliness, but demonstrating considerable sympathy and humanity towards one another.

The story is set on the outskirts of Barcelona: an eerie combination of dusty landscape and scattered agricultural fields. Solitary sandy pathways connect the high-rise buildings in the adjacent suburbs and the landscape is crossed by motorways and country roads.

The backdrop to the story is a blistering hot summer and a relentless sun, which gradually burns the landscape to golden-brown dust. This desert-like scenario is accompanied by country and western music, which serves to intensify the oppressiveness of the situation. Throughout the film we hear the weather forecast on the radio, which promises no end to the heat wave and ever rising temperatures. *The Plague* begins with Yuri wrestling. He faces the camera directly, almost on the ground, with his opponent over him. From the start his coach encourages him simply to persevere and continue fighting; his face is covered in sweat and contorted with effort. We later learn he comes from Moldova and is waiting to get immigration papers. He works as an agricultural laborer helping

Raúl, a small farmer who has long promised him a contract.

Raúl's crop is threatened by white fly, an insect plague, which can only be washed away naturally by thunderstorms or eliminated through the use of chemicals. But the farmer sells his produce as organic. Any hope of recovery appears out of sight.

After half the harvest is destroyed, Raúl is forced to look for another means of earning a living “as a forklift driver on a site”. Yuri is also affected by the plague, since Raúl can no longer offer him the promised work.

Raúl's story makes clear that the bleak life of a farmer is no romantic idyll, but rather a bone-grinding job, where work always comes first and one remains at the mercy of nature.

A friendship exists between Raúl and Yuri who work so closely together. They watch football together in a club. Toward the end of the film Raúl visits Yuri in hospital after the latter injures his leg in a wrestling match. Pressured by the coach to persevere, Yuri had fought on in spite of the pain. Referring back to the opening scene, we witness how he now has to cope with the tragic consequences of his own determination.

Relations and the solidarity exhibited between people is a central theme of the film. A parallel story deals with the relationship between Maria, an 88-year old woman with a hunchback who has to leave her house because of health problems, and Josemarie, a caregiver from the Philippines who looks after her in a nursing home. The old woman is still mentally alert. She feels uprooted and unhappy in the home with the elderly people who spend their days alone and depressed.

The exchanges between Josemarie and Maria are a delight and utterly convincing. Cantankerous Maria has

reached an age where she will not be pushed around by anybody. At the same time, Josemarie is obliged to ensure that the old woman is washed and kept clean. The acerbic exchanges between them over the need for a shower conceal a growing bond between the two women.

Unable to stand the conditions in the nursing home, the crippled Maria takes flight and returns to her old home. A shot shows the now dried up flowers that Maria had so tenderly cared for. Sad and alone, the only option left to her is to let Raúl drive her back to the home.

The conception of the film and the camera work are fully concentrated on the protagonists, all amateurs playing themselves. Raúl is in fact a farmer, and he explains in an interview that his family have always worked the land. *The Plague* builds an emotional tension created by both the dramatic events and the camera work. The viewer is always close to the proceedings; there are many close-ups of faces, and the actors are often filmed from behind as if the viewer were following them.

The final story, which takes place only on the margins of the film, is less successful. Maribel, an older prostitute, sits on her camp chair on one of the field tracks and smokes, while waiting for customers who “never crop up”. In the past she was able to earn a crust, but now she is lucky to earn a few cents. She says little, and her story remains undeveloped in the film. She has a conversation with Yuri, in which one learns something about her motivations. Yuri tries to offer her some comfort and declares “better times will come”, although he hardly believes it himself.

There are a number of poignant moments in *The Plague* when the characters share their burdens. A discussion between Josemarie and another Filipino caregiver after the death of an old man reveals that Josemarie has had no professional training. Nevertheless, in another scene, she shows she has already made considerable development. She warns a younger colleague not to get too emotionally involved with the elderly patients whose lives are coming to an end. It is we, the caregivers, who suffer after they die, she says.

Despite her words of warning, a closing scene in the film shows Josemarie attending the death bed of Maria and obviously deeply affected as the old woman

approaches her last breath. A credit following the film notes that Maria did pass away in 2012.

The director, Neus Ballús, 33, was herself born and grew up on the outskirts of Barcelona. This is her second film. She originally wanted to make a documentary about the region, a film about the “special character” of the residents of this area. She chose these five people because she found them quite unusual, and was fascinated by their combination of “loneliness, strength, humanity and beauty”. They retain their dignity despite the fact that their daily lives are reduced to a struggle for survival.

The work on the film took four years. Ballús spent the first two years getting to know the people and becoming friends with them. Equipped with only a video camera, her intention to make a documentary changed over time and the film that finally emerged was a portrait of the feelings and relationships of Maria, Josemarie, Yuri, Raúl and Maribel.

The deep level of trust between the film crew and protagonists is very evident. The film shows people living in isolation, on the edge of society, worrying about their future, confronted with “the feeling of a threat beyond our control”, as the director explains. *The Plague* lacks some of the superficial nods and winks towards politics on display in some other films on view at the festival. Instead it stands out for the sympathy and warmth it shows for its protagonists.

*To be continued*



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