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BY JESSE CATHERINE WEBBER · FILM ·

Foremost by Night – Víctor Iriarte [Venice '23 Review]

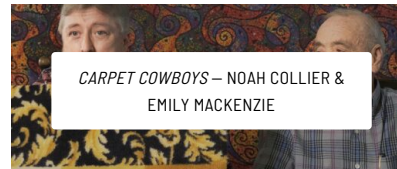
September 7, 2023

Victor Iriarte's *Foremost by Night* has more reputation behind it than its status as a first fiction feature would suggest. Alongside Iriarte's resume, which includes work with Isaki Lacuesta (one of the film's producers, whose collaborator Isa Campo also co-wrote the script) and Raya Martin, as well as serving on the selection committee for the San Sebastian International Film Festival, are those of lead actors Lola Dueñas and Ana Torrent. Dueñas is most well known for her work with Pedro Almodóvar and a supporting role in Lucretia Martel's *Zama*, and Torrent just re-teamed with Victor Erice – who first directed her as a child in *The Spirit of the Beehive* – for *Close Your Eyes*, his first feature in thirty years. In *Foremost by Night*, these two exciting performers both play mothers of the same young boy, Egoz (newcomer Manuel Egozkue).

The first two of the film's four parts feature almost no dialogue, the narrative guided via epistolary narration and image. First, in a letter to Egoz, Vera (Dueñas) explains how, eighteen years ago, she gave birth to a son who was taken from her. After years of being told her file didn't exist, she finally retrieves a record from a librarian, who, in a direct-to-camera address, says it was meant to be burned but never was, pointing Vera to Egoz and Cora (Torrent). Though Cora was told she could not carry a pregnancy to term and that the only way she could have a child was to adopt Egoz, whose mother had died during childbirth, both mother and son seem to have suspected a biological mother was still alive. And though the Francoist dictatorship is never explicitly referenced, and the film's present setting suggests Egoz was taken from Vera early in the 21st century, the connection is quite clear even to an outsider not especially familiar with recent Spanish history.

The second part of *Foremost by Night* documents the reactions of Egoz and Cora, who also received Vera's letter. Though both are confused – this confusion expressed through a voice memo from Cora to Egoz, as well as a letter from Egoz to Vera accompanied by a dance sequence – this new information ultimately does not place any strain on their relationship and, crucially, Cora never expresses any resentment toward Vera (or vice versa). The film's third section, the final before a brief epilogue that returns to the epistolary format, places as much attention on the relationship between Vera and Cora as the one between Vera and her lost son. In scenes between the two actors, it would perhaps be sufficient merely to give them space to perform, and the warmth they express toward each other is indeed quite powerful, but Iriarte also explores their relationship through a juxtaposition of their bodies – at times they appear almost singular. The ease and beauty of the relationship between the three characters is a failure of fascism: as much possibility and time as has been taken from them – and the pain is deliberately overwritten rather

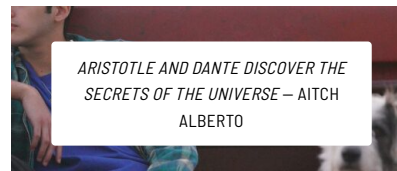
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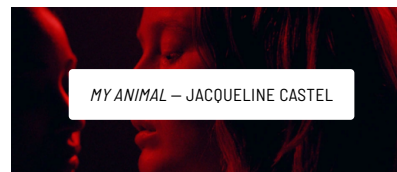
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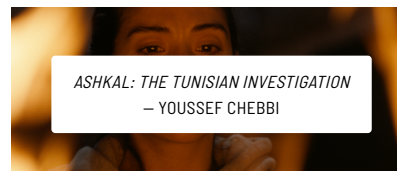
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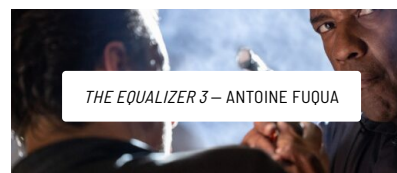
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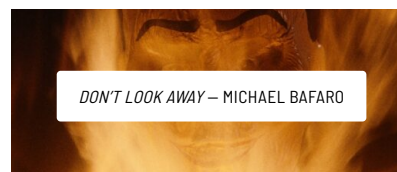
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than elided – the ultimate result not only sees the doubling of motherly love, but also the birth of a new kind of love between Vera and Cora.

The film continues to shift, and a climactic reparative heist sees the bond shared by the three characters strengthened, at the same time offering a culminating display of Iriarte's knack for rhythm. Music is present throughout the film (Cora is a piano teacher and Egoz a musician), as is a precision of movement, and in the film's final sequence, Iriarte unites these features with a similarly meticulous pattern of cutting just as his three lead characters are united. *Foremost by Night* delivers on the strength of its artists' resumes, but also exudes the vitality of an exciting new voice.

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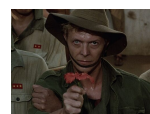


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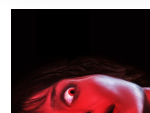
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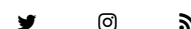
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