



Stockbridge Community Cinema

Programme Notes 18 OCTOBER 2024

La Chimera

Italy | 2023 | 130 min | Cert 15

Director: Alice Rohrwacher

Screenplay: Alice Rohrwacher

Starring: Josh O'Connor, Carol Duarte, Vincenzo Nemolato

Spoiler warning: these notes are best read after viewing the film as they contain plot and character details.

Alice Rohrwacher's new film is a beguiling fantasy-comedy of lost love: garrulous, uproarious and celebratory in her absolutely distinctive style. It's a movie bustling and teeming with life, with characters fighting, singing, thieving and breaking the fourth wall to address us directly. As with her previous film *Happy as Lazzaro*, Rohrwacher homes in on a poignant sense of Italy as a treasure house of past glories, a necropolitan culture of ancient excellence. It can be plundered for the present day artefacts and spirits raised from the dead, but at the cost of incurring a terrible sadness: a feeling of surrounding yourself with ghosts.

The setting is Riparbella in Tuscany in the 1980s, and Josh O'Connor is tremendous as Arthur, a dishevelled Englishman in a grubby white suit sporting six-day stubble and a perennial cigarette. He is a former archeological scholar who has assumed the morose, slouching gait and coiled style of a gangster. When we first see him, he has just been released from an Italian prison. In the course of what were once his entirely respectable studies in this region, he befriended Flora, a local, ageing aristocrat in her vast, crumbling house (a lovely performance from Isabella Rossellini) and fell in love with her daughter Beniamina. But Beniamina is gone – dead, we understand – and Arthur's agonised longing for her, his need to be reunited with her in the spirit world, has fused with his expertise into a criminal superpower. Using a dowsing rod, Arthur can tell where invaluable Etruscan antiquities are buried and has teamed up with a bizarre homeless gang of grave-robbers to dig them out under cover of darkness. They then sell them for a fraction of their worth to a shady dealer called Spartaco who can counterfeit the spurious provenance documents claiming that this loot is part of some prewar Italian family estates, with which they can be legally sold on for a fortune to foreign buyers.



These days, Arthur is living a squalid shantytown of corrugated iron sheets up in the hills and hanging out with this Fellini-esque platoon of grinning, squabbling, tomb-looting troubadours whose income comes theoretically from farming and entertaining the locals with their singing. On their tractor, they lead a parade through the local town on a feast day. But it is well known that they are part of the thriving hidden market in stolen antiquities; everyone is an expert thereabouts and in one hilarious moment, one character addresses the camera to say she loves the Etruscans for their sensitivity, and that their culture might have saved Italy from its machismo. Rohrwacher shows us that everyone here knows what the museum world does not know, or chooses not to know: that there is no such thing as an antiquity that isn't stolen.

Everything comes to a crisis when Arthur finds himself with his dodgy crew at a local booze-up and there's a glimmer of a new emotional connection with Italia (Carol Duarte), a young woman who was once Flora's unpaid maid and singing pupil, fired for keeping two children secretly in the house. Just as this new romance looks like progressing, Arthur has a tingling; he and his mates start grubbing with their hands in the earth and Arthur starts to get that feeling Howard Carter had going into Tutankhamun's tomb. Is this the big one? Or does Arthur, in his crazed grief, think it's better than that; might he be reunited with Beniamina beyond this banal world of mortals?

La Chimera is a film that utterly occupies its own fictional space; it expresses its eccentric romance in its own fluent movie dialect. I was utterly captivated by this sad, lovelorn adventure.

Peter Bradshaw

The Guardian 26 May 2023