Just imagine if Ernest Hemingway hooked up with the Brothers Grimm to write a screenplay based on the story of Snow White, and they got Francisco Goya to shoot and Tod Browning to direct. If that sounds cool, there’s even better news: Spanish filmmaker Pablo Berger has channeled all those energies through his own artistic sensibility and made one of the year’s most memorable, haunting films.

While this black-and-white silent feature has the misfortune of timing and comparison to THE ARTIST—as well as two other recent films about a malevolent queen hell-bent on the destruction of a fair young girl—rest assured: BLANCANIEVES (Spain’s official entry for this year’s Best Foreign Language Film Oscar, hitting theaters in New York and LA January 25) is its own thing. Set in the hot-blooded, violent and romantic world of 1920s Spanish bullfighting rings, magic castles and traveling carnival shows, the movie tells, in linear fashion, the tale of comely Carmen (played as a child by Sofía Oria and later by Macarena García)—yes, her character name is a homage to the opera.

It begins in the womb. Carmen’s drop-dead gorgeous mother drops dead in childbirth, leaving her matador daddy Antonio (Daniel Giménez Cacho) heartbroken. So distraught is he, he can’t bear the sight of the baby. While Carmen is sent to live with her doting dancer grandma,

Antonio marries the naughty nurse who attended his wife. Encarna (PAN’S LABYRINTH’s Maribel Verdú) is more than just naughty, though: She’s downright nefarious.

When a chain of fateful events brings Carmen to live with Antonio and the wicked stepmother in the mansion of contrasts, she soon finds that living there could also mean dying there. She flees and winds up in a traveling road show with “The 7 Bullfighting Dwarfs” and finds her true calling—which is, of course, her family legacy. The brave beauty quickly rises to fame in the corrida under the stage name Blancanieves (Snow White). But her success as a toreador doesn’t sit well at all with evil Encarna, who’s got more than just a poisoned apple up her sleeve.

Arty to the max, flooded with music not many modern ears will prick to (flamenco, balletic) and hardly cut like a typical genre film, BLANCANIEVES is sometimes trying. It’s slow-moving, lacks subtlety and takes an awfully long time to get to its more Grimm-like horror elements. But along the way—rather like a sweet-tasting, slow-acting poison—the film infuses itself into the nervous system. Carmen is a character you care about, and Encarna is a sharply drawn adversary. The dwarfs are at once charming, dashing and a bit creepy, and the bullfight scenes are beautifully choreographed and filmed. And the moment of suspense as shiny Red Delicious meets sweet lips is truly chilling. The Spanish Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences members chose wisely when they selected BLANCANIEVES for its Oscar bait.