

“WE ARE WHAT WE ARE” (Film Review)

Written by Samuel Zimmerman
Friday, 18 February 2011 09:30



The best horror is often transcendent, using the grim and fantastic to discuss harsh real-world concerns. When such is the case with international fare, it can be a stimulating and exciting experience learning which fears the globe shares, and what horrors are all our own. Jorge Michel Grau’s cannibalism drama *WE ARE WHAT WE ARE* takes on such an aesthetic and not only comes to the U.S. as a damn good film, but a particularly resonant one.

The film (opening in New York City today and available on demand February 23 from IFC Films) sees a poverty-stricken family of cannibals lose their way of life when their patriarch is struck dead, and the questions of who will lead, who will provide and whether they can ultimately carry on are raised. From its opening, Grau establishes a quiet, unsettling atmosphere. His camerawork is subtle, but stylish and immediate, without flash or shake. The family’s conditions are awash in squalor and one gets a sense that, aside from talk of necessary ritual, if they didn’t consume human flesh, they wouldn’t exactly have the means to eat regularly.



As the crisis unfurls, the family descends into what could be considered common behavior for loved ones in dismay. Old tensions arise, the two sons, Alfredo (Francisco Barreiro) and Julián (Alan Chávez) argue fiercely, their mother Patricia (Carmen Beato) shuts down and sister/daughter Sabina (*SIN NOMBRE*’s Paulina Gaitan) is forced to mediate and take on authority. When the young, unprepared and unsure Alfredo becomes convinced of his rightful succession, he journeys out to prove his manhood, believing he can procure their next meal while learning who he is and what doing what he must really means.

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It's relatable, a family on the edge, and despite what they are, the drama is powerful. As is the tension, as the film also follows a pair of detectives on the trail of a digested finger found in the father's stomach. You ache to know if they'll succeed and continue on or implode, and what's more, if you're OK with your empathy for them. WE ARE WHAT WE ARE is concerned with class division in Mexico, but as the consequences of a down-turned economy are sadly realized by so many American families as well, the penchant to cannibalize each other figuratively and do what we must as humans to survive (even to those in the same situation) has become a global burden.

While the four leads put in standout work, WE ARE WHAT WE ARE falters a bit in that despite how engrossing and well-done the present family drama is, we're privy to very little of what lies beneath it. There's a truly heartbreaking moment between Alfredo and Patricia amidst a scenario of stunning violence, and when Alfredo explodes under the pressure of the task at hand and the weight of his mother's lifelong treatment of him, it speaks volumes. It's just too bad there isn't more time devoted to what those volumes consist of.

Nonetheless, WE ARE WHAT WE ARE is a standout debut for Grau. Gorgeously constructed and successful as both a surface-value horror story (the violence is often matter-of-fact, grimy and brutal) and a saddening look at the current plight of the lower class, it's hopefully only the beginning of great output from a strong new talent.



See an interview with writer/director Grau in FANGORIA #301, on sale this month.

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