

Julieta

The great Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar has been nominated for four Academy Awards since 1988 and won once with “All About My Mother” as Best Foreign Language Picture. His latest production—his 20th feature film-- could place him in the category again. After misfiring with the lurid farce, “I’m So Excited” (2013), Almodóvar has returned to drama and, surprisingly, has taken as his source three short stories of Canadian writer Alice Munro published in her collection “Runaway”

“Julieta” stars Emma Suárez and Adriana Ugarte, playing the older and younger versions of the film's titular character. The film opens in Madrid with the older Julieta (Suárez) learning, after many years, of the whereabouts of her long estranged daughter Antia from the daughter's old school friend, Beatriz (Michelle Jenner). With this news, Julieta sits down to write a journal about her life, and the film flashes back to the days when Julieta (now played by Ugarte) encounters a young married fisherman Xoan (Daniel Grao) on a train, has a romantic episode with him, and eventually comes to live with him on the coast after he wife dies.

The couple have a daughter but ultimately contend over Julieta's suspicion of Xoan's interest in a long-time friend Ava (Inma Cuesta), and she storms out of the relationship, only to later learn that Xoan has perished in a gale at sea. The film then shifts in time—in a wonderful two-shot—to later in Madrid with Julieta (now again Suárez), living with her daughter and her inseparable best friend Beatriz. Then suddenly, after attending a spiritual retreat, the 18-year-old Antia abandons her mother leaving behind only a cold note denouncing her. For some years she tries to learn why her daughter has rejected her, even having a breakdown that sends her to the hospital. Ultimately, a letter from Antia arrives which opens up the possibility of Julieta reconciling with her.

As it turns out, Almodóvar radically transforms the understatedness of Munro's broth-like prose into his own pungent gazpacho cinema. He does this using some of his signature elements: striking shot selection (with a concentration on his female faces), a rich color palette, dashes of melodrama (here moderated somewhat) within intricate plotting, and intense, credible performances from his actresses. Suárez and Ugarte may not look very much like one another (the blonde hair is consistent), but their performances still mesh splendidly through a similar sensibility and tone. “Julieta” is a relatively muted Almodóvar but a fertile one.

(The film is rated “R” for mature themes and runs 99 mins.)

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