

The Second Mother

Few films from Latin America get mainstream exposure in American movie houses, but the occasional one that slips through is often worthy. In recent years, winners—both critical and at commercial—have come from Argentina (“The Secret in Their Eyes,” *Wild Tales*) and Chile (“No” and “Gloria”). Now, in 2015, we have another laudable example, this time from Brazil. “The Second Mother,” like the films cited above, is a contemporary story that precisely illuminates the society it depicts.

“The Second Mother” centers on Val (Regina Casé) a live-in housekeeper serving a wealthy family in a Sao Paulo suburb. She is accepting and dutiful in working for the husband, independently rich “Doctor” Carlos (Lourenço Mutarelli), and his supercilious wife, Doña Barbara (Karine Teles), but she cherishes her role as a surrogate mother for the family’s son Fabinho (Michel Joelsas), a teenager whom she has cared for since he was a toddler. Their attachment is strong: lanky Fabinho still climbs into Val’s bed when he needs comforting. Meanwhile, her own daughter Jessica (Camila Mardila) has matured without her own mother in a provincial town in Northeast Brazil. Now, quite grown up, Jessica comes to Sao Paulo to study architecture and, to her mother’s consternation, moves into the household.

Jessica is an assured, aspiring young woman who sees no need to adjust to the upstairs-downstairs setting which her mother has accepted. Self-possessed, she unthinkingly breaks the barriers of class, stressing out Val with every new action or expression. For example, sleeping on a mattress in the maid’s room is totally unacceptable, so she cajoles her own separate bedroom from Doña Barbara. Further, Jessica not only wants to eat with the family (“at the bosses’ table”) rather than in the kitchen like her mom, but she is outspoken once there. She’s cowed by no one while her mother cringes with each new faux pas. “You think you are special,” intones Val to Jessica, and it is not a compliment.

How this class conflict is handled, and how both Val and Jessica come to adjust to it and eventually look towards a new life, generates both the humor and the poignancy of “The Second Mother.”

The film is the fourth feature made by Anna Muylaert, an experienced Brazilian screenwriter and TV/film director, and her first one to receive international recognition, with appearances at the Sundance and Berlin Film Festivals. She proves a perceptive and affecting observer of her own society, and, while the film is pointedly Brazilian, its theme of class divisions being challenged and disrupted is pertinent across all societies. That sense of observation is heightened by her composed and naturalistic filming technique, where the camera often holds on a static middle-ground shot while the protagonists move into and out of the frame.

“The Second Mothers”’ cast is admirable, from young Joelsas’ gangly, puppy-doggish Fabinho through the clueless imperiousness of Teles’ Doña Barbara to the unsettling weirdness of Carlos as played by Mutarelli. Camila Mardila is just right as the ready-for-anything Jessica, a young woman who, abandoned by her parents, fashions her own life and self with a hard-earned confidence.

Of course, the movie's engine is Regina Casé as Val. She makes her ever-deferential character both understandable and complex, never cloying or sappy. She gets all the best laugh lines, too, always chiding her daughter after her latest outrage. Though long cowed by her drudging life and class, she, too, is finally able to break free. To confirm her own liberation at one point, she quietly leaves her modest bedroom in the night, takes off her shoes, calls her daughter in town, splashes around in ankle-deep water, and announces her transgression: "I'm in the pool!"
(*This film is rated "R" and runs 112 min.*)

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