

The Secret in Their Eyes

Somewhat surprisingly, the Argentine film “The Secret in Their Eyes” (*El Secreto de Sus Ojos* in Spanish) was the winner of the Oscar for the Best Foreign Language Film released in 2009. Few in Washington had heard of it, much less seen it. It has finally opened locally at several local art houses, and this review is one shout out to see this finely crafted film before it leaves town prematurely (in Spanish with subtitles).

The film opens in Buenos Aires in the year 1999, when a newly-retired criminal court investigator clerk, Benjamin Esposito (Ricardo Darin), begins reflecting on—and hoping to resolve—a notorious rape/murder case of 25 years before in which he was involved. He brings his project to his one-time supervisor, now a judge, Irene Menéndez-Hastings (Soledad Villamil), with whom he has been in love for years. Esposito looks to write a novel based on the unresolved case, which still haunts him, and he consults with Irene in his research.



The film then flashes back to 1974 to follow the case’s original intricacies involving the devastated husband of the victim, Ricardo Morales (Pablo Rago), as well as Benjamin’s boss Irene, and his principal office colleague, the roguish drunk Sandoval (the comic Guillermo Francella).

Esposito and Sandoval eventually identify a likely prospect,

Soledad Villamil and Ricardo Darin in Oscar winner the surly thug Isidro Gomez (Javier Godino), who eventually confesses to Benjamin and Irene (in a fascinating good-cop, bad-cop sequence). Though convicted, Gomez gets off suddenly and mysteriously through the intervention of the then-Peronist government. Esposito’s contemporary investigations then lead him back to Gomez, but the more he pieces together the past, the greater their bearing on the present, as elements of the crime and its possible perpetrators rise to the surface again.

The film was written and directed by Juan Jose Campanella, an Argentine filmmaker of class, who also happens to do a lot of television work in the US (esp. with the crime drama “Law and Order”). His last feature film to be released here, “The Son of the Bride” (also starring Darin, a favorite actor of his), was one of the best foreign language pictures of 2001. While the latter was a warm, idiosyncratic family story, “The Secret in Their Eyes” is a cooler and more detached work, but no less accomplished (it is based on a novel by Eduardo Sacheri). It has been a smash hit in Argentina.

“The Secret in Their Eyes” contains elements of a carefully plotted whodunit, of course, but these are made much the richer by an emphasis on the intricate relationship involving the two protagonists and, especially, the complex and carefully limned legal

world in which they move. This is sophisticated, adult filmmaking with a storyline which keeps you guessing, a script that convinces, and a cast that shines.
(Rated "R" for language, nudity, and violence, the film runs 129 mins.)

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