

Mondays in the Sun

A few years ago, *The Full Monty* was a worldwide movie hit. The sad plight of how a gang of six laid off steelworkers in Northern England make their mark (as strippers) was a delightful comedy. Now a new motion picture, *Mondays in the Sun* ("Los Lunes al Sol") presents us with the sad plight of how a gang of six laid off shipbuilders in Northern Spain copes with both job loss and their own personal dignity as men. No comedy this time--but a poignant and real slice of contemporary life.

Mondays in the Sun shows these six men, all recently dismissed from jobs at a local shipyard in the northwest province of Galicia (the film was shot in the towns of Vigo and Pontevedra) and struggling with the loss. Rugged Santa (Javier Bardem) pugnaciously refuses to accept his dismissal; moony José (Luis Tosar) is at sea, troubled that his wife, Ana (Nieve De Medina) has become the bread-winner; lumpy Lino (José Angel Egido) doggedly continues the job search, though against long odds; Serge (Serge Riaboukine) is a displaced Russian with dreams of his days in the Soviet space program; and Amador (Celso Bugallo) an old timer who has mostly given up hope. They all--when they aren't in unemployment lines--regularly gather at the bar of Rico (Joaquin Climent) who at least was able to open a bar with his severance pay.

They jaw, they drink, they complain, they reminisce, they dream, they drink... It's an ongoing conversation about real and imagined slights, about hopes for a break, about the need for a few extra *pesetas* (we are pre-Euro here). More than a plot, we have a set of well-rounded character studies (it reminded me of another British film with the same spirit (*Last Orders*), with particular emphasis on Santa, José, and Lino.

Egido and Tosar are both wonderfully nuanced in their honest portrayals of Lino and José. Exemplary moments: the former's tired face turns panicky when his newly-applied black hair color (used to appear younger) trickles behind his ear; the latter's hang-dog face and misty eyes when he suspects his wife is cheating. Both these actors, and the rest of an accomplished cast, exude the naturalness of real people and the poignancy of those whose world has been toppled.

Still, it is Javier Bardem who leads this ensemble. Bardem has already shown he's a consummate actor in both Spanish and English films (he was a 2000 Oscar nominee in *Before Night Falls*), and here he buffs up his considerable credentials. His Santa is a bluff mug, able to just control his rage, yet just sensitive enough to look out for a work mate (his discovery of how old friend Amador really lives allows him to show, wordlessly, a wondrous range of emotions). The actor captures perfectly the ego-crushing weight of job loss for many men and how much "work" means to their self-respect. His response to his fate can, by turns, be infantile or sardonic or thoughtful, and Bardem makes these transformations--especially from what may seem to be a simple man--incisive and intricate.

Director Fernando Leon de Aranoa, in his third film, gets it right. He has studied these fellows and knows how they will react to each other, where their *machismo* stops and starts, how they are the same--and very different. He avoids the obvious. Sadly, one thinks of how an American movie would handle--botch?--such material. There would be, predictably, some outburst of rage from the disaffected working stiff, and something would get blown up. In *Mondays in the Sun*, the biggest "explosion" is Santa throwing a rock which breaks a street lamp. Not only is the gesture true, it carries

symbolic weight about his character. He and his friends are characters worth getting to know, even in their misery.

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