

Nine Queens

A caper film from Argentina with a twist may not figure as the first item on most people's movie wish list, but for those rather more adventuresome souls--whose appetite for the novel may have been whetted by the recently completed Filmfest DC--one could do worse than make a visit to *Nine Queens* ("Nueve Reina").

The setting is today's Buenos Aires, with the rootless young Juan (Gaston Pauls) clumsily trying a scam at a convenience store. His scam backfires, and he is apprehended in the store and hustled out by an apparent tough cop. However, the cop is really Marcos (Ricardo Darin), another, more practiced swindler who, it turns out, has lost a henchman and could use a partner for his various confidence games. Juan, inexperienced as he is, prefers to work alone but agrees to play along with Marcos for at least a day. Introverted Juan prefers the silent, covert act that people don't even notice, while Marcos, much more the performer, is willing to be obnoxious and noisy to get what he wants. These are both crooks who pride themselves on working *without* weaponry, who trade on exploiting people psychologically, not confronting them with violence.

They work a few deals with some effectiveness before Marcos and Juan fall into a major scam based on some extremely rare stamps (a block of the "nine queens" of the title) which might be sold to a secretive Spanish businessman Gandolfo (Ignasi Abadal), who is due to leave town the next day. The Spaniard is housed in the city's classy Hyatt Hotel, where Marco's sister Valeria (Leticia Bredice) works. She is totally alienated from her scoundrel brother, suspects he is up to something nefarious, and wants him out of the hotel. Marcos cheats an ailing counterfeiter Sandler (Oscar Nuñez) out of a set of the fake "Nine Queens" and, enlisting Juan's help, tries to make a deal with the snaky Spaniard.

Complications--lots of complications--ensue as the two hustlers show the fakes, lose the fakes, find and buy the genuine stamps, and finally fence them to their eager buyer, but only with the reluctant help of Valeria. Rather than the desired cash, Marcos ends up with a certified check, but, when he heads for the bank to deposit it...*ay Dios!*..the bank is closed and customers are banging at the doors. The bank has crashed, the check is worthless, and Marcos and Juan are destroyed--except for the one last, major twist.

However, its flavor does not particularly depend on its Buenos Aires setting; it could just as likely have been set in Amsterdam, Rome, or Hong Kong with only the language changed and be just as effective. The one scene that shocks you with its apparent prescience is that run on the bank at the end. The sequence looks like it is "ripped from the headlines," as they say, foretelling the run on Argentina's financial institutions after the country's recent general bankruptcy. It turns out that the film has not predicted Argentina's monetary turmoil; the bank in the film has gone bankrupt because its corrupt board has run off with the assets. Still, it makes for a fitting finale for this tough urban tale in a troubled society.

Nine Queens is the feature debut of Argentine director Fabian Bielinsky, a longtime assistant director and maker of commercials, who hit the local jackpot with his first film. Nominated for ten awards by the Argentinean Film Critic's Association in

2001, it won seven, including prizes to Bielinsky for both direction and screenplay. He has crafted a smart and crisp caper movie with considerable momentum, several clever feints, and deft plotting.

It's just that quality of a canny, clean machine that makes this the kind of foreign film that is likely to be remade someday by Hollywood (perhaps starring the likes of Robert DeNiro and Matt Damon) and messed up with too many "production values." In this movie, it probably helps that the cast is made up of actors we don't know. Since they are new to us, we carry no preconceived views of how they will perform in the film, and we can remain more open to the characters they play. The leads in the film, by the way, are both very effective: Ricardo Darin as Marcos is devilish but charming, the kind of guy whose scams one might actually be drawn to, while younger Gaston Pauls, as the more diffident Juan, exhibits the wary yet bemused quality of a lone fellow of the streets. *Nine Queens* may not be king-sized, but it deserves a look from filmgoers looking for something a little different.

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