

The Good Boss

As a genre, workplace movies have made only a marginal impression over decades of cinema. (*by “workplace” I mean factory or manufacturing settings, not white-collar offices, for which there is a much larger sample*). This is curious since film audiences everywhere experience so much of their life at their jobs. One obvious reason is simple escapism, since laborers spend so much time at work that they want movies that whisk them out of that often boring realm and into something different from their humdrum jobs. Occasionally, however, a motion picture on this theme breaks through to find drama and comedy, pathos and humor in the bowels of a company. Such a film is the Spanish language “The Good Boss” (“*El Buen Patron*”) written and directed by Fernando Leon de Aranoa

Julio Blanco (Javier Bardem) is head of the Blanco Basculas manufacturing firm, which makes industrial balance instruments and weighing machines in a middling Spanish town. This family business has been prosperous, in part because Blanco, an affable dude, treats his workers well, looking after them and calling some of them “familia.” Still, he must do the necessary and inevitably fire some personnel.

He is doing just that at the film’s opening, patiently explaining to an older worker, José, that he is being sacked. José (Oscar de la Fuente) is furious, refuses to accept his fate, and promises revenge. Blanco has further problems with Miralles (Manolo Solo), his long-term top manager (and childhood friend) whose work has become erratic because of domestic problems with his wife Anna. Blanco seeks to help him so he does not have to let him go. He also casts his eyes on a young intern, Liliana (Almudena Amor), assigned to the factory, who he helps gets a position at a small dress shop run by Blanco’s wife Adela (Sonia Almarcha). One more burden for Blanco: a veteran assembly line worker, Fortuna (Celso Bugallo), has an adolescent son who has slipped under bad influences, and Fortuna looks to the boss to get Adela to take him on at her shop.

All of these pressures surface right as the factory anxiously awaits the visit from a national award committee assessing Blanco Basculas for potential recognition in their field. They all are a threat to upset Blanco’s life, to upset the “balance” he believes in so adamantly, just as he believes in his balance products.

Through all these burdens, Blanco looks to be the “Good Boss” of the title: at ease with all classes, protective of his workers at all levels, flexible in treatment and alert to frailties. However, he also harbors an element of condescension and a language just on the edge of sarcasm.

Complications ensue and pressures increase. Chief among them is the sacked José, who sets up a garish, trashy 24/7 protest space just across from the factory’s entrance (where the police can’t touch him), railing at Blanco every day. His advances on Liliana are stanchied when she informs him that she is the daughter of his best friend as a child. In fact, she comes on to him more than the

opposite. His honest approaches to Miralles' wayward wife are rebuffed with a vigorous slap... All these contretemps threaten the industry award he craves.

Some of these conundrums are resolved, but while he is pushed to the point of fury, Blanco keeps the lid on, ever confident he can find a way to control his ire and sort things out. It is fascinating to watch the actor Bardem—so capable of explosions of fury (see “No Country for Old Men”)—control his wrath.

Besides its impeccable directing by Leon de Aranoa (who worked with Bardem before in another workplace setting “Mondays in the Sun” in 2002) and the skillful editing of the multiple story lines by editor Vanessa Marimbert, “The Good Boss” works so well because Javier Bardem is such a master film actor. The film is essentially played out as a roadmap of his elastic face, which shows a dramatic range from false bonhomie through genuine empathy to buried rage. To paraphrase Hamlet, “’tis a performance devoutly to be witnessed.”

(Honors: The film was nominated for a record 20 “Goya Awards” this year—the Spanish Oscars—and won six, including Best Picture.)
(This film, released in DC in late August, is not rated and runs 120 minutes.)

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