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presents:



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# ABOUT THE FILM

Abel Ferrara's first dramatic feature since 2014's *Pasolini* re-teams the filmmaker and his frequent lead Willem Dafoe, who delivers a career-best performance as the title character, an older American expat living in Rome with his young wife and their daughter. Disoriented by his past misgivings and subsequent, unexpected blows to his self-esteem, Tommaso wades through this late chapter of his life with an increasingly impaired grasp on reality as he prepares for his next film. *Tommaso* is easily Ferrara and Dafoe's most personal and engrossing collaboration to date, a delicately surrealistic work of autofiction marked by the keen sensitivity of two consummate artists.

115 min. | Italy/UK/USA/Greece | 2019

## Ready, Willem and Abel by Nick Pinkerton

*The following is an excerpt of an article originally published by Artforum, June 8, 2020*

There is a certain species of fecund artist from whom work seems to flow in abundance, like a natural byproduct of their existence. In literature there are the Simenons and Honoré de Balzacs; in pop music, the Chief Keefs and Mark E. Smiths. Various popular cinemas through the years have supported such prolificity—think '30s Hollywood or '80s Hong Kong—though as the mechanisms of production became more onerous in America, it became the provenance of independents and experimental filmmakers, from Stan Brakhage to Kevin Jerome Everson. In the latter-day commercial cinema, a business of house-of-cards financing schemes and endless practical exigencies, the super-producers are the rarest of the rare, with perhaps the best-known of the last half-century being R.W. Fassbinder, who of his frenzied output said, "I would like to build a house with my films. Some are the cellars, others the walls, still others the windows. But I hope in the end it will be a house."

Abel Ferrara, who completed his first feature—a porno called *9 Lives of a Wet Pussy*—in 1976, hasn't quite equaled Fassbinder in architectural output in the subsequent years, but it may be noted that the two men are united in their combining workaholicism with other extralegal addictions. Fassbinder burned out from the mixture back in 1982, while Ferrara, following a long stretch in which his voracious appetite for illicit substances was a matter of public knowledge, survived long enough to get sober, around 2010; the title of his 2017 documentary *Alive in France* bears more than a little trace of astonishment. Through the years of debauchery, Ferrara never stopped working, but his last decade—almost all of it spent living in Rome—has been marked by an explosion of creative activity accompanied by an unexpected bump in visibility for a quintessential outsider artist. [...]

*Tommaso* stars Willem Dafoe, who has worked with Ferrara in the past and since (their *Siberia* was in the main competition at this year's Berlin International Film Festival). Dafoe plays, in the title role, an American filmmaker living in Rome, like Ferrara. Like Ferrara, Tommaso is a recovering addict, a regular attendee of N.A. meetings. Like Ferrara, whom I have had occasion to observe in mid-shoot in recent years, he quaffs from an omnipresent bottle of mineral water, a substitute for more potent libations. Like Ferrara, he has a Moldavian wife some years his junior, and with his wife a very young daughter, parts played respectively by Ferrara's wife, Cristina Chiriac, met on the set of *Pasolini*; and his daughter, Anna Ferrara. The apartment they occupy is that of the Ferrara family, making this very much a "home movie" in the Cassavetes sense.

The film à clef form is nothing new to Ferrara—after starring himself as an angry, anguished artist in 1979's *The Driller Killer*, he has populated his films with several characters who could be read as on-screen alter egos, the most transparent of these the New York City-based filmmaker Eddie Israel, played by Harvey Keitel in 1993's *Dangerous Game*, which features Ferrara's then-spouse, Nancy, in the role of Israel's wife. [...]

As a prismatic portrait of a filmmaker, *Tommaso* might be considered a spiritual sequel to both *Dangerous Game* and *Pasolini*, though its central character is a far less gloomy figure than Pasolini, less pugnacious than Israel. While Ferrara's films are often remembered for their violent outbursts, he's also a wonderful director of quiet interludes, and these make up a large part of *Tommaso*, which describes in intent detail the contours of a sixtysomething expatriate filmmaker's everyday existence as seen through the smooth Steadicam strokes of a widescreen frame. We see Tommaso taking Italian lessons, going to market, helping his wife with dinner, taking his daughter to the park, changing the lightbulb on a reading lamp. We see him attending N.A. meetings, where he listens to people's stories of addiction and tells his own: a catastrophic tale from a Miami location shoot that almost certainly refers to *The Blackout* (1997). We also see him giving acting lessons to a classroom of young Italians and practicing yoga stances that evidently require a great deal of strength and training, moments which seem closer to Dafoe than to Ferrara—both men live in Rome and are only a few years apart in age, and the film has the feeling of being an almost symbiotic collaboration. [...]

*Tommaso*, however, isn't exactly a reformed reprobate's paean to the simple life, à la Lou Reed's "Average Guy." Its protagonist may be domesticated, but that's very different from being settled. The calm surface of his existence is disturbed by a terrible, clawing neediness—"We don't have relationships, we take hostages," an N.A. member says of addicts—manifested most acutely by nagging sexual hunger. A hot-and-heavy moment between Tommaso and his wife early on is interrupted by their child, and he'll be heard to grouse afterward that the baby sank their sex life. When he volunteers to walk a female N.A. member home, he hovers on the precipice of daring intimacy, the entire sequence a little miracle of tonal precision. In a later scene with a female student, he oversteps the precipice—or at least appears to. Throughout the film, Ferrara moves freely between two levels, that of the "real" and that of his protagonist's fantasy life; he feels no need to distinguish the two. There is the odd, Kafkaesque dream of being dragged into an

interrogation room, but most of Tommaso's imaginings are erotic in nature, and like many a lover tempted to stray, he projects his temptation onto his partner, so between fantasies of romping with the barista at his corner café in the nude, he is pursued by visions of his wife two-timing him with a variety of young himbos.

*Tommaso* was the product of a loose and largely improvised shoot; one of its richest and oddest scenes, involving Tommaso confronting a homeless man whose drunken bellowing is disturbing the baby, was, according to Ferrara, the result of a random encounter. What structure it has evolves through playing variations on a theme, namely pedagogy. From its opening in the Italian classroom, the film returns repeatedly to depictions of the transmission and exchange of knowledge. Knowledge can take on a corporeal form: What we see of Tommaso's acting classes emphasizes movement, and he repays his Italian instructor by teaching her breathing exercises. It can also take on what we might call a spiritual form, as when an N.A. friend relates to Tommaso his personal philosophy on "becoming human," a status not naturally achieved but learned. All of this winds through a movie which has at its center a small family unit, and which is concerned with the responsibilities of parenting (the parent being the first and most important teacher), the way that past failures in that responsibility mark that family unit, and the way our need for parents and teachers and lovers can impossibly confuse these roles.

As in *Pasolini*, Ferrara gives us insight into his protagonist's inner life through glimpses of his work-in-progress—in this case through voice-over readings and storyboard sketches and YouTube reference clips from the then-in-preproduction Ferrara-Dafoe *Siberia*. All of this, up to and including a penultimate crucifixion scene that literalizes the adage "Each man has his cross to bear," invites accusations of navel-gazing narcissism, though how any film so vibrating with cinematic ingenuity could be received as anything other than an act of generosity is beyond me. (A paradox: "self-absorbed" work may be a source of tremendous pleasure and relief to others.)

Ferrara lives to film and films to live, a process that risks creating a dog-chasing-its-tail closed circuit but is redeemed by the filmmaker's openness to the world and to happenstance, an openness that allows for moments like Dafoe's scene on the street with the rowdy drunk. To allow for possibilities is to allow, too, for the possibility of failure, and Ferrara's filmography isn't always a smooth ride—but, miraculously, it keeps going. In Fassbinder's house metaphor, there's a suggestion that judgment might be suspended on individual works, that they could be understood as part of a larger architectonic design. It's an indulgence we grant the abundant artist—we'll take a *Despair* to get a *In a Year of 13 Moons* (both 1978)—but one that *Tommaso* has no need of. To the House of Ferrara, it makes a very handsome addition. ♦



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