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**Friday September 7th, 2018**

**A Fantastic Woman (Cert 15)**

*Dir:* **Sebastián Lelio**

*Starring:* **Daniela Vega**

*Sponsors:* **The Venue cinema**

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**Synopsis: Santiago, Chile, the present.** *Trans nightclub singer & actress Marina Vidal is having dinner with Orlando, her partner. Later that evening, he is taken ill. Marina gets him to hospital, but he dies. Her gender means that the police suspect Marina of causing his death in some way, and Orlando's family are hostile towards her, especially when she tries to attend his funeral, forcing her to leave her home and threatening and assaulting her. She finds inner strength to face down the provocation and aggression she is subject to, attends the funeral in spite of Orlando's family and returns to her club to perform.*

The viewer first encounters Marina Vidal (Daniela Vega), the defiant, enigmatic protagonist of Sebastián Lelio's fifth feature, as she sings a jaunty 1970s number immortalized by Puerto Rican salsa star Héctor Lavoe. "Your love is yesterday's newspaper," she serenades, sharing complicit glances with the man identified as her partner, Orlando (Francisco Reyes), the 57 year old owner of a textile company who has come to the hotel club where she is singing to pick her up for dinner. The film's opening scenes focus on Orlando in both work (office) and leisure (sauna) spaces, leading the viewer to believe he is to be the film's protagonist - one of the numerous false pointers impishly dropped into the screenplay. It is, however, Marina who quickly takes over as the films lead as she deals with the aftermath of Orlando's sudden demise.

Early sequences work to establish the relaxed intimacy of the couple's relationship: the informal birthday dinner at a Chinese restaurant; their tender dance; the passion of their lovemaking back at Orlando's flat. They are palpably at ease in each other's company. But from the moment Orlando suffers an aneurysm 12 minutes into the film, everything changes. Marina, a trans woman, is shut out of his affairs by both his family and by the authorities: framed peering through the window of the Hospital emergency room where Orlando is being treated; left standing in a space designated an 'area sucia' (dirty area); made to leave the apartment she shared with Orlando; confronted and thrown out of his wake at the pointedly titled Church of the Sacred Family.

Both the narrative and the camera work seek to signpost Marina's grief: as she opens Orlando's wardrobe, she buries her head in his clothes to take in his scent; as she drives, the focus on the empty car seat where he once sat physicalises the absence in her life. Lelio also ruptures the realist veneer of the film by showing how Orlando continues to haunt Marina's every day activities: we see his reflection in her sunglasses; sitting in the back of her car at the carwash, or standing in the crowd at a noisy discotheque; or guiding her into the crematorium to bid farewell to his corpse. The void is made all too tangible. Orlando's ex-wife Sonia (Aline Küppenheim) may see Marina and Orlando's relationship as perverse - referring to it as a soap opera, which she contrast with her own 'normal'

past with him - but the film's play with authenticity and reality ultimately undermines any fixed ideas about what constitutes the normal or the natural.

*A Fantastic Woman* is, in many ways, a tale of emotional survival in the wake of verbal, physical and psychological abuse. Undermined, ostracized and even criminalised, Marina is made to feel a social pariah - by the doctor (Alejandro Goic) who informs her of Orlando's death, asking if "Marina Vidal" is her nickname; and by Cortés ( Amparo Noguera), the female detective from the sexual offences unit, who assumes that theirs was a violent, abusive relationship. " You don't need to treat me like a criminal," she tells the doctor, who has asked the police to bring her back in after she runs out of the hospital in shock. The frequent side-view filming of these encounters points to a confrontational hostility that marginalises Marina, repeatedly pushing her out of conversations. The complicit mutterings between the policeman and the doctor at the hospital find a later echo in the whispered encounter between Cortés and the forensic services doctor who is asked to examine Marina.

"I don't want uniforms," Marina tells her sister and brother-in-law. "I don't want anything." Her actions, however, demonstrate that she does want something: respect, recognition as a woman and the chance to say goodbye to a loved one. Orlando's brother (*Neruda's* Luis Gnecco) offers her some of Orlando's ashes as a compromise for staying away from the wake, but she refuses these crumbs from the official family table. Orlando's son Bruno (Nicolas Saavedra) is more candid in his exclusion of her. He insults her as "faggot and monster", bundling her with the help of his friends into a pickup truck and disfiguring her face with Sellotape to create a physical manifestation of the image he has of her. "I don't know what you are," he says, as he pins her to the wall of his father's apartment. Sonia informs her that "When I look at you, I don't know what I'm seeing...a chimera". The film's reflective surfaces - mirrors, car windows, sunglasses - present Marina through multiple perspectives, further reinforcing the different dimensions that Orlando's family refuses to see. Marina's fluid identity is shown to threaten the interests of a social order whose power structure is based on absolutes.

In Marina, *A Fantastic Woman* has a lead whose earthy pragmatism and sense of decency evoke the up-beat Gloria, the title protagonist of Lelio's 2013 feature. Both seek release in the pulsating beat of neon-lit discos and both are marked by a dignity and sense of self-worth that sees them take justice into their own hands. Marina climbing onto the roof of Sonia, Bruno and Gabo's car to demand the return of Orlando's dog Diablo recalls Gloria's paintball attack on the house of her cowardly, duplicitous lover Rodolfo. Like Gloria, Marina features in pretty much every frame

from the moment she enters the film. "I'll survive," Marina tells her sister and, like Gloria, survive she does.

Daniela Vega's performance as Marina is both luminous and contained. "Always so mysterious," her boss at the restaurant observes, and Marina carries her grief with dignity, composure and self-control. To those who address her by her birth name Daniel, she defiantly responds: "My name is Marina." It's a line she repeats on numerous occasions to all those who refuse to accept who she is.

Lelio and his director of photography Benjamin Echezarreta choose to present the film firmly from Marina's perspective. The widescreen compositions afford her a dignity that the authorities deny her. At the hospital, the door of the toilet cubicle acts as a buffer as she collapses in a crumpled heap, tightly holding a plastic bag containing Orlando's possessions. During the medical examination she is forced to undergo, the film shies away from capturing the more intimate and invasive part of the procedure. Instead the camera affords the viewer the chance to get to know Marina, at first keeping its distance, then gradually moving closer, placing us in the car next to her or walking beside her as the narrative progresses; it lingers briefly on the merry-go-round outside the window when Cortés first asks her about the injuries sustained by Orlando as he fell down the stairway while she was trying to get into hospital, providing an effective metaphor for the situation Marina now finds herself in. Lelio's deployment of fantasy sequences further provides a mode of articulating her state of mind. We watch her physically soar on two occasions; the first battling a windstorm on her way home, her body arching upwards as if walking on air; the second at a nightclub late on in the film, when she floats in the air leading a choreographed sequence in a magnificent gold and silver tinsel outfit.

The soundtrack merges Matthew Herbert's luscious score, dominated by long legato string phrases, with melodies that act as a further commentary on the action: Aretha Franklin's 'A Natural Woman' as Marina returns Orlando's car to his ex-wife; the Alan Parson's Project's 'Time' as Marina and Orlando dance after her birthday dinner; Marina's soaring rendition of Geminiano Giacomelli's 1734 '*Sposa son disprezzata*' aria narrated from the point of view of a faithful but insulted wife, and the uplifting '*Ombra mai fu*' aria she sings from Handel's *Xerxes*, which closes the film. The last functions as a fitting homage to the man she loved and lost, and is gloriously rendered, like Lelio's accomplished and deeply moving film, with shifting harmonies, gusto, poise and heartfelt emotion.

#### Credits

<b>Marina Vidal</b>	Daniela Vega
<b>Orlando Onetto Pertier</b>	Francisco Reyes
<b>Gabriel (Gabo) Onetto</b>	Luis Gnecco
<b>Sonia</b>	Aline Küppenheim
<b>Bruno</b>	Nicolás Saavedra
<b>Adriana Cortés</b>	Amparo Noguera
<b>Wanda</b>	Trinidad González
<b>Gaston</b>	Nestor Cantillana
<b>Doctor</b>	Alejandro Goic
<b>Director</b>	Sebastián Lelio
<b>Screenplay</b>	Sebastián Lelio, Gonzalo Maza
<b>Director of Photography</b>	Benjamin Echezarreta
<b>Editor</b>	Soledad Salfate
<b>Music</b>	Matthew Herbert
<b>Art Direction</b>	Estefanía Larraín
<b>Sound</b>	Alberto Alén
<b>Costume</b>	Muriel Parra

#### Another View

Credit where credit's due: in making *A Fantastic Woman*, director Sebastián Lelio has given audiences a gift. It's not so much the director's lilting, perfectly fine film that one should be grateful for, but rather the discovery of Daniela Vega, who shines in a drama that relies heavily on her charisma and talent to make up for a curiously sparse plot.

Vega plays Marina, a young trans singer who is in a committed relationship with Orlando (Francisco Reyes), a man 30 years her senior. They have plans to build a life together which are abruptly cut short by his sudden illness, leaving Marina adrift in the world, forced to face the ire of her boyfriend's disapproving family. It's a story that has played out onscreen many times before with varying degrees of success, and Lelio's script leaves a lot to be desired in this respect.

Aside from the characters of Marina – and to a lesser extent Orlando – there is little room for character development. The thoughts, fears and motivations of other characters are fairly one-note, with the revulsion of Orlando's ex-wife and son towards Marina being limited to her being considerably younger than him and a trans woman. Only Orlando's brother is shown as sympathetic towards Marina, but he is little more than a footnote.

The film would do well to explore these attitudes more than it does, but in presenting almost every single frame of the film from Marina's perspective, there is little room to show anything but her internal struggle. As such, we watch as Marina goes about her daily drudgery in the wake of her lover's death, attempting to piece her life back together. She's played with an enchanting sense of restrained vulnerability, publicly put-together but privately falling apart. She struggles to reconcile the man she loved with the family he had, particularly their hostility towards her, threatened by a perceived danger she poses to the fabric of their family.

Lelio attempts to deal also with the injustices many trans people are subject to – in one tense scene, Vega is forced to strip naked by police officials who believe she was being abused by her partner, and she is frequently misgendered by other characters. This humiliation speaks to the real-life discrimination thousands of trans women and men face across the world every day.

*A Fantastic Woman* is a film on the cusp of greatness – Benjamin Echezarreta's dreamy cinematography lends it an ethereal quality, as does Matthew Herbert's flute-heavy score, capturing the way Marina's spirit seeks to break free from the confines placed on it by society and Orlando's family. Yet it's hard to shake the feeling that something is missing.

The film starts off strong, and it is refreshing to see a trans woman portrayed as having a life beyond her trans identity. Such characters are lacking in cinema, and Lelio does make an attempt – as he did so successfully with 2013's *Gloria* – to shine a light on an underrepresented community.

But subplots lead nowhere, and the film frequently threatens to fizzle out altogether. There is an unfinished quality to *A Fantastic Woman* that does a disservice to the undoubtedly interesting character at its centre, and its message (beyond preaching the tolerance that Marina never finds herself) is unclear. The solution seems evident – give the resources to trans filmmakers and screenwriters so that they might tell their own stories, rather than these being imagined through the lens of cis artists.

**Hannah Woodhead, Little White Lies**

#### Our next screening - 7.30pm, Friday September 14th Beast (UK 2017. Cert 15)

Moll lives at home with her parents on the island of Jersey. Though 27, she is treated in an unforgiving way by her domineering mother, the legacy of a misdemeanour she committed as a schoolgirl. When she meets Pascal, a free-spirited man of her own age, long-buried passions are awakened, which lead to an explosive release of emotions that have devastating consequences for all.

Starring Jessie Buckley (who fulfils all the promise she showed in *War and Peace*), and inspired by real-life incidents, *Beast* is a very modern take on the fairytale and a significant first feature by director Michael Pearce.