



Lincoln Film Society

~ world class cinema for a world class city ~

Patron: Jim Broadbent

Registered Charity No. 1156478

Friday November 8th, 2024

La Chimera (15)

Dir: Alice Rohrwacher

With: Josh O'Connor, Carol Duarte, Vincenzo Nemolato

This review is reproduced with the kind permission of Sight and Sound magazine

Synopsis: Arthur, a former British archaeologist, returns to Italy after being released from prison for grave robbing. He finds that artefacts which he had buried in the ground beneath a tree are missing. Arthur confronts his gang and they return the artefacts and attempt to reconcile. He rebuffs them. During a festival in a nearby town, a farmer approaches them about locating a tomb on his land. Arthur's friends agree to look for it. They search for the tomb, which Arthur locates using a dowsing twig and 'chimeras' - visions he experiences upon standing atop a gravesite. They scare the farmer away and excavate the grave. The gang discovers a statue of Artume but decapitate it. It becomes a bargaining chip but Arthur falls out with his gang. He joins another gang stealing artefacts. They persuade him to enter a tunnel which collapses. Arthur has one final vision.

Weeds grow through the cracks in every pavement in Alice Rohrwacher's wayward, wondrous *La Chimera*. They twine through the flagstones outside the crumbling Tuscan manor where Flora (Isabella Rossellini) awaits the return of a daughter who disappeared, imperiously ignoring the visiting chatter of the four who did not. They straggle between the sleepers of the railway tracks outside the abandoned Riparbella station house, tripping up the little kids – hair sticky from headlice ointment – who play on them. Just like the ragged life that bursts and floods the frames of Helène Louvart's wild, windswept photography, the weeds of *La Chimera* can't be stopped and won't be tamed, reaching up into the sunlight from the cool, dark underground. Which is also, of course, where the dead live.

Connecting underground and overground, the realm of the dead and the land of the living, there's Arthur (Josh O'Connor) a young Englishman in an increasingly grimy linen suit, who seems to have settled and sprouted here: a seed carried in on the breeze. It is the early 1980s and Arthur is rudely awoken from a train-lulled dream of his gone-girlfriend, Beniamina, by the conductor asking for his ticket. He is returning to the region after a stint in jail for the crime of grave-robbing. Arthur and his gang of local *tombatori* have for some years made their living using Arthur's uncanny knack for dowsing to locate and plunder ancient Etruscan burial sites, fencing the booty to a shady dealer known as Spartaco.

He immediately falls back into his old *tombatore* habits. Though Rohrwacher sometimes films these raids in the knockabout fast-motion of a one-reeler silent, Arthur is worn-down and



heartsick, as frayed as the cuffs of his ever-dirtier suit. Despite the unqualified faith of his rascal gang, and the troubadour who sings songs about him like he's a folk hero, every new find seems to take more out of him, leaving him stubbly and surly and scowling – imagine an antiheroic Indiana Jones as played by Elliott Gould as written by TS Eliot. (O'Connor's performance is one of the film's many miracles in making such an improbable character feel real). Only in Flora's delighted presence does he relax and smile – “Arthur, my only friend!” she calls him – perhaps because, while he's lying to her about her daughter Beniamina's fate, he can lie to himself too. But it's also at Flora's that he meets Italia (Carol Duarte), Flora's “tone-deaf” singing student, who is daffy and gorgeous in a Miranda July sort of way and who reminds Arthur of the pleasures of topside life, despite the downward lure of dreams and visions in which Beniamina's red dress unravels and the dead ask him for all their stuff back.

No description of what happens in *La Chimera* can adequately convey what happens in *La Chimera*, which feels like watching an occurrence of ancient magic, from the point of view of the spell. Arthur is the protagonist and his gradual awakening to the fact that his lifestyle is built on a desecration of the very things he loves, gives the film its structure. But Rohrwacher's real story here – splitting the difference between the earthiness of *The Wonders* (2014) and the whimsicality of *Happy as Lazzaro* (2018) (and surpassing them both in vivid strangeness) – is the story of the Tuscan ground and the beautiful secrets that sleep beneath our feet. In a transcendent sequence – knowingly modelled on the catacombs scene in Fellini's *Roma* (1972) but further removing the human element – Arthur discovers his biggest find yet, buried incongruously in the shadow of a massive power plant. It is a long-forgotten shrine that has lain undisturbed in glimmering blackness for millennia. Before Arthur and his raiders of the lost dark enter from above, Rohrwacher breaks a rule: She grants us a privileged look inside, at the silent grace of its white marble statue, at the humble votive offerings left by the pre-Christian devout and at the brightly-painted frescoes of birds and animals that adorn the walls. The moment the gang breaks through, a rush of air steals the colour from the murals. Not even Arthur has seen what we have, though he implicitly understands the tragic paradox. So many

inestimable treasures that we look upon with awe have lost half their beauty to the looking. Rohrwacher is fascinated by the ransacked archaeology of Arthur’s psyche. He simultaneously worships history, preserving a little cache of artefacts of no value to anyone but himself, while also destroying it for money. So perhaps the only perfectly ironic ending is for him to become a part of history. Through the songs being sung about his exploits. Through the way his story grows within the crevices of Italy’s long, striated past. And through *La Chimera* itself, a joyous, masterful work of folk magic that plays like a discovery dug up from the ground where it has been for centuries, just waiting, in a rebellious reversal of that tragic shrine scene, to burst into full bloom before the gaze of living eyes.

Credits

Arthur	Josh O’Connor
Italia	Carol Duarte
Pirro	Vincenzo Nemolato
Flora	Isabella Rossellini
Spartaco	Alba Rohrwacher
Melodie	Lou Roy-Lecollinet
Jerry	Giuliano Mantovani
Mario	Gia Piero Capretto
Melchiorre	Melchiorre Pala
Fabiana	Ramona Fiorini
Il portuale	Luca Gargiullo
Beniamina	Yile Yara Vianello
Nella	Barbara Chiesa
Vera	Elisabetta Perotto
Rossa	Chiara Pazzaglia
Sista	Francesca Carrain
Katir	Luciano Vergaro
Spalletta	Milutin Dapcevic
Director	Alice Rohrwacher
Screenplay	Alice Rohrwacher, Carmina Covino, Marco Pettenello
Cinematography	Hélène Louvart
Editing	Nelly Quettier
Music	Lina Cardillo
Italy 2023. 132 mins	

Another view

A woman is missing. Arthur (Josh O’Connor) imagines her, he sees her in his dreams, but deep down he knows that Beniamina (Yile Vianello) is gone, even if he can’t admit it to himself. Or to her mother, Flora (Isabella Rossellini), who he returns to after a short stint in prison. He can’t quite adjust to the outside world, and not just because Italian isn’t his first language and some locals giggle at this strange Englishman. There is something destabilising, too, about Alice Rohrwacher’s style, which she has expanded for *La Chimera*, her fourth feature, into something almost linear, with all sorts of visual ideas – from exaggerated blocking, to jump cuts, to sped up footage – that are seldom used more than once. And only after eighties-sounding synths appear on the soundtrack, about an hour in, do you notice that the film’s setting is ambiguous: it could be the modern day or a few decades earlier, or, in a deeper sense, it could be much, much older. History is close to the surface in Central Italy, as it seems like everyone is living within the accumulated wreckage of thousands of years. But the temporal divide is made stark when Arthur, falling back in with his Felliniesque gang of grave robbers, digs into the ancient Etruscan tombs scattered everywhere. In the cold silence of

this long dead world there is breathless tension, and it feels like they might never be able to return to their own world.

But Arthur has a stronger sense for this archaic world. He has an extrasensory ability to dowse for tombs, and whenever he stands atop one, the camera – at first slowly, then in sharp flashes – turns upside down, or maybe, for him, the right way up. He is like an Orpheus who can only look back, always too terrified to face the world in front of him and what has left it.

Though the camera often follows Arthur’s perspective, it isn’t neatly tied to it. Just as it doesn’t make a precise distinction between images shot on 16mm, Super16 and 35mm; one isn’t used only for dreams, even if it’s most associated with them. Rohrwacher instead makes connections through something more primal than logic, a flow of images that feels surprising but always intuitive, in the way a dream does.

This doesn’t make *La Chimera* distant or elusive, quite the opposite. It invites us into its labyrinthine structure and form, it allows us space to explore. Rohrwacher implicitly makes the case against coherence: much of life exists beyond our understanding and so, to express it except through abstraction and suggestion, is to flatten and obscure the depths of beauty and truth in the snatches of a conversation half-heard in a Robert Altman film, or a language only partially understood. Because, to quote another artist whose work feels far older than their time, “There are cracks in everything, that’s how the light gets in”.

Esmé Holden: Little White Lies

**Our next Screening: Friday November 22nd
Perfect Days (Japan, 2023. Cert PG)**

Hirayama works as a toilet cleaner in Tokyo. His work is undemanding and each day follows a routine - listening to music, reading, taking photographs and gardening. This simple way of life gives him time to enjoy and appreciate other things he finds important, especially the beauty of trees and interactions with other people. Wim Wenders’ film has been hailed as one of the best he’s ever made, “deliberately slow cinema that will draw you to the edge of your seat if you’re willing to go along for the ride.”