Movie Review: 'Bella'

by David_Elliott

â€œBella," a bilingual arrival with a strong Latin flavor, doesn't quite settle for being sweet and simple. An excellent cast, keenly used New York locations and basic, human situations give the film some grip.

EDUARDO VERÃ•STEGUI - Star of the family movie, "Bella" that won the People's Choice Award at the Toronto Film Festival in 2006 RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) It stars Eduardo Verastegui, who has highly expressive eyes above an almost biblical beard. Maybe that beard is to texture the good looks that until now kept the Mexican actor mostly in pop music (the band Kairo) and telenovelas, while desiring a noncliched, American role that led him to instigate this very sincere production.

As Jose, a former soccer star in the making, unmade by a trauma that has left him cooking in his brother's Manhattan restaurant, Verastegui avoids most of the common Latino pix cliches. A kitchen showdown with

the brother (Manny Perez) does get into the shouting, fireball close-ups so frequent in American Hispanic films, the king of ballistics being John Leguizamo.

Jose is decent but not dull, suffering but not (despite the beard) an ersatz Christ figure. His heart opens to Nina, a waitress Danny fires. As Nina, Tammy Blanchard is very natural, even soulful, and her finding that Jose has much to offer shapes the almost anecdotal story.

As the actors provide a lot of direct, genuine details, Mexican director Alejandro Gomez Monteverde, on his third feature, knows how to move them gracefully across the simple floor tiles of story. Music helps, and there are charming, not too cookie-cut roles as Jose's parents by Angelica Aragon and the humorously engaging Jaime Tirelli, who won't speak English.

"Bella" (the name only comes into play at the end) is basically, like the parents' fine Mexican lunch, a menu of comfort food. Neither sappy nor theme-piled, it is about the need for a listening ear, an available shoulder, a welcoming beach, a home-cooked meal when nerves nag your spirit.

A Miramax Films release. Director: Alejandro Gomez Monteverde. Writers: Alejandro Gomez Monteverde, Patrick Million, Leo Severino. Cast: Eduardo Verastegui, Tammy Blanchard, Manny Perez, Jaime Tirelli, Angelica Aragon. Running time: 1 hour, 27 minutes. Rated PG-13; 2 1/2 stars

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