

Movie Review: 'Gomorra' is a vivid journey through the mean streets of Naples

by Lee Grant

"Gomorra" doesn't take place in Tijuana but in Naples, Italy, yet the movie's startling street violence ignites images occurring in Mexico.

RATINGS GUIDE:

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Based on the book "Gomorra: A Personal Journey Into the Violent International Empire of Naples' Organized Crime System" by Naples native Roberto Saviano, it also recalls TV's peerless "The Sopranos" in its interlaced stories about crime families jousting for power and control of lucrative income streams.

In "The Sopranos," it was waste management. In "Gomorra" (the word is a variation on "Camorra," one of Italy's notorious, secret criminal societies), it's toxic-waste disposal with other tendrils in the fashion industry, of all things, construction and food production.

Citizens of Naples and nearby Caserta, meanwhile, can't help but be engulfed in the violent battles amid opposing criminal forces that have over the years resulted in thousands of deaths.

Following the publication of his book and information supplied to Italian law enforcement, Saviano reportedly has been living under police protection.

The movie (in Italian with English subtitles) is a confluence of stories with vivid personalities making their way in this threatening, terror-filled world. There are established honchos, some gruff and trigger-happy, and others classier in suits and ties, still cruel when crossed.

"Gomorra" is voyeuristic, peering in and out of buildings and relationships inconspicuously. At the beginning, there's a coldly choreographed, tensely engorged vignette of fat men set in a tanning salon that crafts the tone for the unnerving quiet moments to follow before the explosions.

In this film, don't expect resolution. Things aren't resolved easily in Naples, a city in the shadow of Mount Vesuvius. "Gomorra" takes its time telling stories, but does so with careful detail. You feel plopped into the middle of things, a frightening place to be.

It's not a typical Mafia or gangster movie — toss out anticipation of another "Godfather" — though two local, jerky guys play at "Scarface," one even shifting from his Italian dialect into a Cuban-flavored impersonation of Al Pacino's Tony Montana in "Scarface."

And remove, too, expectations of a beginning, middle and end. "Gomorra" wades neck-deep into the lives of characters residing uneasily in a kind of noisy, feverish tenement building. There's anxiety and despair.

Among them is Pasquale (Salvatore Cantalupo), a mild-mannered tailor secretly teaching a contingent of Chinese immigrants how to sew. The reigning dons don't like that so he travels to the factory and back in the trunk of a car. Inside the plant, it could be downtown Los Angeles with poor folks toiling nights, fearful of authorities.

And there's Toto (Salvatore Abruzzese), only 13 and not a man, earning money as a delivery boy and finding himself on the opposite end of a gang dispute from his best friend. "If you don't change sides," says Toto, matter-of-factly, "we may have to kill you."

Matteo Garrone, director and co-writer (one of five), inserts his camera into the subterranean existence of the crime-infested city, the above-ground industries and the regular people caught in the muck. It's a travelogue of sorts to a place in the specter of Mount Vesuvius that stays calm for a time before erupting and covering those in its way with a cascade of blood.

"Gomorrah." Unrated. Running time: 2 hours, 15 minutes. 3.5 stars.

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