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La Chimera

Alice Rohrwacher, Italy/France/Switzerland

BY JASON ANDERSON



“Strange people, the Etruscans,” one character muses in Alice Rohrwacher’s new film. “They believed the flight of birds predicted destiny.” It’s unclear exactly what *La Chimera*’s protagonist—played with the requisite brooding intensity, and a half-decent grasp of Italian, by English actor Josh O’Connor—is able to divine when he looks up late in the film and sees a flock of birds fluttering back and forth across the sky. But imagining that the director has somehow interpreted such patterns to help her determine and calibrate the bustle and flow of her fourth feature is not such a stretch. Prone to veering off in unpredictable directions, *La Chimera* tumbles and gambols along so heedlessly at times that it ought to be a mess. The fact that everything within the film ultimately proves to be anything but accidental is a testament to Rohrwacher’s astonishing abilities on the highest of high wires.

Indeed, given the reliably inventive, hectic, and joyful manner of Rohrwacher's work to date, her practice may have a closer resemblance to a circus act than it does to the activities of her peers. An eager revivalist of a quintessentially Italian cinematic mode that peaked with the comedies of Fellini and Monicelli in the '50s and '60s—and quite possibly croaked with Totò not long after he made *The Hawks and the Sparrows* (1966) with Pasolini—she happily functions as both storyteller and three-ring impresario, resorting to whatever acts and tactics (high or low) are required to keep spectators engaged, if occasionally bewildered. Distractions, digressions, and wild implausibilities have a habit of piling up, but any excesses are easy to forgive due to Rohrwacher's limitless enthusiasm for the task at hand, as well as her affection for the misfits and misfortunates who populate the mucky rural landscapes that she and her regular cinematographer H el ene Louvart capture so vividly.

La Chimera is Rohrwacher's first effort since becoming a bona-fide Oscar nominee and Disney+ landing-page fixture for last year's *La Pupille*, a typically idiosyncratic holiday-themed short that bore the imprimatur of producer Alfonso Cuar n. The presence of two stars, in O'Connor—who followed his breakout as Yorkshire's hunkiest farmer in *God's Own Country* (2017) by serving as *The Crown's* memorably caddish Prince Charles—and Isabella Rossellini, may have also raised concerns that increasing commercial pressures may cause Rohrwacher to straighten out her knotty ways. Yet the new feature is very much of a piece with *The Wonders* (2015) and *Happy as Lazzaro* (2018), the director having described the three as a loose triptych of films about connections between the past and the present.

Compared to the vivacious sisters in *The Wonders* and the holy fool at the centre of *Happy as Lazzaro*, O'Connor's Arthur is a heavier-hearted and craftier sort, as befits a man who we meet just after he is freed from prison for criminal endeavours and associations that he swiftly, if reluctantly, resumes. Arthur is part of a colourful gang of reprobates who eke out a living by searching the Umbrian countryside for treasures and trinkets buried along with the region's Etruscan residents in the centuries before their civilization was absorbed into the Roman Empire. As a sad, scruffy Englishman in an ever-more-distressed cream-coloured suit, Arthur initially seems like such an unlikely part of this crew that it's hard to understand why they pursue him with such ardency in the early scenes, but his mysterious ability to find Etruscan tombs with the help of a dowsing rod clearly makes him an invaluable asset to their operation.

Arthur's skill demonstrates his profound connection to the spirit world, a place he also seems to access via his visions and memories of his lost love, Beniamina. Arthur's longing to be reunited with her is absolute, even though neither he nor her dotty mother Flora—played with palpable relish by a wheelchair-bound Rossellini—will concede that she is dead. Driven by a desire he understands is impossible, Arthur proceeds through the tawdry business of tomb-raiding with an air of remove, as if he has a tenuous relationship with the here and now. (He's also only dimly aware of the unseemliness of disturbing final resting places for profit, a practice that shocks at least one character when Arthur's activities are revealed.) That he can seem so intangible makes it

easier to understand how he can fit into the gang's overstuffed vehicles and through the tight crevices of various candle-lit caverns and passageways.

Arthur's present circumstances are complicated by his growing closeness to Italia (Carol Duarte), the woman who tends to Flora and her dilapidated home in exchange for singing lessons. Flora's continual carping about her student's tone-deafness should be a tip-off that Italia is in the house for another reason. A charming new addition to Rohrwacher's growing sisterhood of oddballs, Italia is also the only character who can reliably elicit a change in Arthur's gaunt countenance.

A big score by the gang prompts the possibility of an even bigger score, but, like so many of Rohrwacher's characters, they are forever doomed to be strivers and small-timers, the people who get their hands dirty and their clothes filthy while others reap the rewards. In the case of *La Chimera's* intrepid gallery of *tombalari*, they are ripe for exploitation by the fences who clean up the ancient finds and sell them to champagne-swilling collectors and curators. In fact, our rogues are so low on the economic ladder they don't even know the true identity of their buyer Spartaco, who Rohrwacher reveals late in the film with a satisfying flourish.

Of course, by that juncture, the story has stopped, started and doubled back on itself a few times over. The jumble of film formats—35mm, 16mm and Super 16—adds to the sensation that Rohrwacher and co. are frantically cobbling it all together with whatever tools are immediately at hand. Likewise, the director delights in blurring the boundaries between Arthur's dreams and the reality he shares with the multitude of characters crowding into the frame, with poor Arthur continually getting pushed out of shots by both his fellow thieves and several competing clusters, including a rival gang and Beniamina's suspicious, sharp-tongued sisters. Though *La Chimera* is ostensibly set in the '80s, the story seems to flit through a variety of periods, thereby reducing whatever distance may exist between the present moment for our lovable grave robbers and the not-so-long-gone days of their Etruscan ancestors. The elastic nature of time is further exacerbated by Rohrwacher's fondness for the sort of antic-filled montages that used to fill the screen vehicles of the shameless likes of Lino Banfi. Given its sheer unruliness, it's possibly no surprise that the film culminates in what's essentially four different endings, each more pointed and poignant than the last.

Along with *La Chimera's* evocations of dimly remembered Italian comedies and capers, there's a beach-party movie in here too, complete with an uproarious sequence at an outdoor dance. What saves the film from ever seeming unduly retrogressive or nostalgic is Rohrwacher's determination to show how all the old ways can still produce magic. Coupled with her fervent humanism, that drive makes every moment in *La Chimera* feel thrillingly, messily alive. Nor is its vim and vigour ever impeded by its paradoxical nature as both a tragedy about what can happen when we cling too tightly to our memories, and a giddy celebration of the transcendence we may achieve by doing just that. So however strange those Etruscans may have been with their propensity for scrutinizing birds overhead and ensuring their dearly departed had all the pottery they needed, the lesson at hand is that the ones who came after are stranger still.