

American Fango ★★☆☆☆

Directed by Gabriele Altobelli.

Produced by Charles Randolph.

Starring Brando Boniver, with Samantha Scafidi, Emily Jackson, Deborah Twiss, Joseph D'Onofrio, Maggie Wagner and Victor Colicchio.

Written by Kathleen Randolph and Brittany McComas and Gabriele Altobelli.

The great classic Italian filmmakers of the mid to late twentieth-century made their mark by separating themselves, through their work, with conventions established by their Hollywood contemporaries during the golden age. The works of Vittorio De Sica (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948) Mario Monicelli (*Big Deal on Madonna Street*, 1958) and Michelangelo Antonioni (*L'avventura*, 1960), paradoxically, broke with stylistic and commercially acceptable methods of cinematic storytelling, but eventually influenced some of the most successful directors of all time.

The art of Rome was evident in all of their films; the permanence and authority of ancient culture and its beauty influenced every frame. The locations, no matter how briefly photographed, were portrayed as characters; their subtleties would interact with the characters. Almost as much a part of the story as the characters themselves, these landscapes demanded that the audience remain still during the explorative process. The influences of Antonioni and Monicelli, found in the works of Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, and even Stephen Spielberg, are undeniable. It was Antonioni who mastered the art of holding the camera on a character for extended periods after their dialogue was complete. This technique takes the audience into the story underneath the plot and gives us the opportunity to explore the character's internal conflict, giving the actor full command over where they might take us in any given scene.

Examples of this form of cinematic storytelling are rarely seen in the present-day world of independent film; ironically, they are even rarer still in big budget features. In *American Fango*, Gabriele Altobelli's feature-length debut, the influences of the Italian masters are gloriously evident from the opening scene until the last, and the result is a film that is enchanting and uplifting, yet poignant. Altobelli and his talented cast take us on a delightful journey through beautiful Rome, Los Angeles, and New York City. The uninflected photography by cinematographer Antonello Emidi (whose past projects include *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and *The English Patient*) explores these locations while keeping the viewer as up close and personal with the characters as possible. The cast, intelligently assembled by New York Producer/Actor/Director John Gallagher, are delightful. But each of the two lead actors, Brando Boniver (as Francesco) and Samantha Scaffidi (as Kathy) steal the show in their respective roles.

The film explores the challenges that result from being in a relationship based on a false reality. It begins in Rome, where Francesco, an actor with a promising future, finds his life's aspirations and dignity robbed from him after deciding to accompany his girlfriend, Christine, (Emily Jackson) who is also an actress, on her move back home to Los Angeles. Once they arrive, all seems well as he rides in a red convertible along the Pacific Coast Highway to her beach house. But, when Christine abruptly tells Francesco that she has accepted a film role overseas, she also tells him that he cannot remain in the house while she's away. Francesco, while skeptical, initially accepts her explanation, but learns shortly after from a friend of Christine's that he's been deceived: The real reason for the sudden move is that it is Christine's real long term boyfriend- a wealthy travelling businessman-is returning home, earlier than expected, from a business trip. It is he who actually owns the beach house.

Devastated. broke. and with limited command of English. Francesco is forced to navigate the throw-away

culture of America, starting in Los Angeles. At first, he depends on the mercy of a girlfriend of Christine's for shelter. He desperately misses Christine and calls her incessantly for an explanation, but to no avail.

His desperation grows. He calls a friend in New York who promises him overnight accommodations. Once in New York, he finds himself on a couch tour of temporary places to stay, teetering on homelessness. He meets and is taken in by several benevolent women, toward whom Francesco is utterly respectful and gracious. The cultural differences between the American and Italian male are bravely explored. Francesco is on a spiritual journey and as such, does not enter into the realm of casual opportunistic sex with the women, as the audience may have expected here. He does not use his handsome European features as bait. Instead, the focus of his actions are on survival, redemption and finding the hidden truths about his relationship with Christine, and they keep him courageously centered on acquiring higher ground.

Destitute, Francesco finds work in an Italian restaurant where the affable Pino (Victor Collicchio), takes mercy upon him and gives him a job. While his charisma and humility are a hit with the chefs, waitstaff and ladies, his under-developed skills as a waiter provide great physical comedy. Between stolen bites of uneaten food taken from the tables, he accidentally spills food on unsuspecting guests of the restaurant.

Francesco begins to find his way in New York City, and becomes the platonic roommate of Kathy (Samantha Scaffidi) who is the "kept" girlfriend of a married, wealthy, and barbaric Tony (Brian Kelly). Within these sequences, the contrasts between cultures are explored, but more importantly, Francesco begins to discover that he can love again and that his dreams can survive. After Kathy finds out that she's pregnant with Tony's child, the arrangement comes to a head. Francesco finally comes full circle and takes a stand.

Boniver's performance is riveting. He brings the character of Francesco to the edge of breaking down in several places, but stops just short, and every moment of his performance is believable. It's impossible not to root for Francesco and ultimately, for Boniver. His Italian accent (he spent three years of his childhood in Italy) gradually lightens throughout the film. Said Altobelli: "There was a day (during the film's production) where we shot a scene from the beginning of the film, and on the same day, had to shoot one of the scenes from the end of the film. He (Boniver) did this, and adjusted his accent with great skill."

This compact and very fast-moving production has the look of a much larger budget feature film. Said Charles Randolph, its executive producer: "Gabriele got the best out of every character, very quickly. He was very demanding of all of our people, but in a very good way. We finished ahead of schedule, and shot in three cities in three weeks."

Added Altobelli: "It is a story about never giving up."

This is a wonderful, wildly entertaining film. With its superb direction and quickly juxtaposed scenes and sequences, American Fango could become one of the top breakout independent films of 2017. This delightfully honest, fish-out-of-water journey is at once unpretentious, uplifting and thought provoking. The story comes full circle and, upon its conclusion, posits a state of existence; that of the pain endured and humanity required to overcome the agony of starting over in a foreign land.

American Fango is a refreshing return to classic cinematic storytelling. While it is influenced by the Italian masters, it never comes off as heavy handed or dogmatic.