

'The Chosen': Film Review

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Courtesy of Oberon Cinematografica

Antonio Chavarrias' most ambitious film to date is an English-language take on the assassination of Trotsky.

In August 1940 in Mexico, Stalin's old rival Leon Trotsky was killed in his office on Stalin's orders with a pickaxe to the head by a man who the victim thought was called "Frank Jacson," a suspiciously misspelled surname which at the time raised no suspicions. But the killer's name was not in fact Jacson. Jacson was a Spanish communist, Ramon Mercader, and *The Chosen*, Antonio Chavarrias' most ambitious film to date following several well-received small-scale psychological social crit dramas, does a solid job of eking out the suspense and intrigue that this summary implies.

We first meet Mercader (Mexican actor Alfonso Herrera, with just the right generic good looks to play a chameleon), a priest-hating, system-breaking Communist in awe of his mother Caridad (Elvira Minguéz), fighting in the trenches during the Spanish Civil War. In this as in other big scenes, the film does well to conceal its relatively limited budget, but when it comes, the dramatic payoff on this big opener is slight and unconvincing.

Four years later, Mercader is in Paris and is being assigned a new identity as 'Jacques Monnard' by a Russian secret police official, Kotov (Julian Sands); in time-honored Soviet fashion, Kotov obliges Mercader to shoot his dog to show his faithfulness to the Stalinist cause. Mercader also befriends, and becomes the lover, of Sylvia (Hannah Murray), Trotsky's ardent, innocent secretary.

There is a lot of information to get into place for viewers unfamiliar with the story. Chavarrias' script does so clearly and simply, and without over-falsifying the historical events — though if it's the historical events you want, then look no further than Jose Luis Lopez-Linares and Javier Ríoyos definitive documentary, *Storm the Skies*.

The Chosen moves efficiently from country to country and from scenario to scenario, though without ever quite earning the epithet "sweeping"; its tight focus on the characters' intimate relationships rather than on the wider political context — along with the tight budget — see to that. The period detail is convincing and effective throughout.

Behind it all stands the formidable figure of Caridad, a dyed-in-the-wool Stalinist who seems to have imbued her son, in the true spirit of Uncle Joe, with the notion that political goals are more important than human lives. She's fascinating (and convincingly portrayed by Minguez, an actress underused by Spanish filmmakers), and she deserves her own movie. Equally interesting in their own way are the ailing Trotsky, persuasively rendered by Henry Goodman, and Sylvia, with Murray giving perhaps the film's best performance as the wide-eyed, romance-seeking ingenue who will see her faith in both love and politics cruelly shattered (the scene in which this happens is the film's most emotionally wrenching).

But as the heart of the pic, Mercader himself is less interesting and a far cry from Alain Delon's chilling depiction in Joseph Losey's flawed *The Assassination of Trotsky*. Following the shooting of the dog, the viewer waits in vain for Mercader to express even the slightest self-doubt, which might have made him more than a political puppet (an admittedly suave and elegant one), but it never happens. At one point, Trotsky observes that Mercader is a little too perfect, and the viewer has to agree.

The demands of the script mean that Herrera is obliged to play a character playing Mercader, with the end result that although we learn a lot about the elaborate, sometimes mind-dizzying tricks which Mercader had to employ to get into Trotsky's office, we learn very little about The Chosen One himself. This leaves a big emotional hole right at the heart of this intriguing film — a hole which only a heavy falsification of the historical events could have filled.

Production companies: Oberon Cinematografica, Alebrije Cine y Video

Cast: Alfonso Herrera, Hannah Murray, Henry Goodman, Julian Sands, Elvira Minguez, Emilio Echevarria, Javier Godino

Director-screenwriter: Antonio Chavarrias

Producers: Edmon Roch, Antonio Chavarrias

Executive producer: Monica Lozano

Director of photography: Guillermo Granillo

Production designer: Antonio Munohierro

Costume designer: Merce Paloma

Editor: Ernest Blasi

Composer: Arnau Bataller

Casting directors: Heidi Levitt, Natalia Beristain, Cristina Campos

Sales: Oberon Cinematografica

Not rated, 125 minutes