

‘Blancanieves’ Contributes to Silent Film Art

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – The silent film, which was revived by the 2011 Best Picture Oscar winner “The Artist,” is honored again in the new film “Blancanieves.” This artful re-imagining of the Snow White story – set in Spanish bullfighting rings – cherishes the feel of silent film, and features clever composition.

The story in “Blancanieves” is not as strong as “The Artist,” and the Snow White reworking is heavy handed, but director Pablo Berger adds his own outrageous camera work and point-of-view, imbuing the film with both a smart aleck “wink” at the camera and an example of silent film if Orson Welles had been directing back in those days. “Blancanieves” is a passionate night at the movies, unfolding in the clean lines of old time aspect ratio (square rather than rectangular) and mood music that approximates emotions in a varied and expressive way. This is a must see for admirers of the silent film era, and moviegoers who desire a different type of film experience.

Antonio Villalta (Daniel Giménez Cacho) is the greatest bullfighter of 1918 Spain. He has fame, fortune and the admiration of the whole country. His wife (Inma Cuesta) is heavily pregnant, and her mother (Angela Molina) is by her side at an important bullfighting exhibition. Fate intervenes as the bull gores Antonio, causing his wife to go into labor. Tragically, she dies giving birth, and Antonio rejects the new infant because of the loss of his wife and his career – he cannot walk again.



Carmen (Macarena García, Bottom Center) and Her Fellow Travelers in ‘Blancanieves’
Photo credit: Cohen Media Group

As little Carmen (Sofía Oria) grows up, she is raised by her grandmother. When a heart attack kills the old woman, Carmen is forced back to her father's home, and into the clutches of his new wife Encarna (Maribel Verdú). The stepmother treats her cruelly, and refuses to allow her to see her father, but eventually the girl wins a reunion. Years pass, and the now 18 year old Carmen (Macarena García) experiences the death of the father. Encarna wants to kill the girl to get her out of the way, and in Carmen's escape she sustains a head injury that erases her memory. She is adopted by some traveling little people (who dub themselves dwarves) who happen to bullfight, and the story begins anew.

This an extreme melodrama, based on that description, and that is where the film gets a little precious. At first, the extreme good-and-evil clashes fit with the extremes of the old time plots in silent films. But then it gets to be a bit thick, devolving into the familiar Snow White legend. It might have worked better as just the bullfighting story, without the jamming in of the fairy tale, because the story has to jump through some hoops to get us there.

The true beauty of the film lies in how the narrative is composed and constructed. Using all the tricks of the camera, but never going beyond what was available in late 1920s film technology, director Pablo Berger creates a kaleidoscope of imagery that is dazzling. Close-ups and quick cutting enhance the emotion of many scenes, and when married to the bright soundtrack that accompanies the on-screen action, formulates the high and low sentimentality to perfection. It's broad enough to dance with satire, but sincere enough to deliver the fairy tale.

Berger no doubt picked his cast based on their look in his broad spectrum, and they shimmer from the screen. Maribel Verdú (Y Tu Mamá También) is pure evil as the stepmother, and has some fabulous costumes to create the image. Macarena García is radiant as the Snow White symbol, especially effective in the bullfighting scenes and in her interaction with the little people. The actors who play the "dwarves" display unexpected emotions – envy, gluttony and love – and raise that part of the story to a new level.



Apple a Day: Encarna (Maribel Verdú) Peddles the Poison in 'Blancanieves'
Photo credit: Cohen Media Group

The ending had some trouble (think Snow White), only because so much action has taken place beforehand that it feels more like an epilogue than a climax. The art and beauty of the film follow through to those scenes, but the story lags behind. It's a minor complaint, like seeing an inappropriate brush stroke on a fine painting, but it bogs down the film in the crucial last act.

Preserving the feel of the silent era, by reinterpreting it through post-modern cinematic context and the high imagination of Pablo Berger, is the joy of "Blancanieves." As the style of film journeys backward, it moves the art forward.

"Blancanieves" continues its limited release in Chicago on April 5th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Maribel Verdú, Daniel Giménez Cacho, Macarena García, Ángela Molina and Sofía Oria. Written and Directed by Pablo Berger. Rated "PG-13"



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By [PATRICK McDONALD](#) [16]
Senior Staff Writer
HollywoodChicago.com
pat@hollywoodchicago.com [15]

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