

I'm So Excited! (2013)

Comedy. Starring Javier Camara, Cecilia Roth and Lola Duenas. Directed by Pedro Almodóvar. Rated R. 99 minutes.

Review by: Yiran Sun

I'm So Excited! is the latest film by Pedro Almodóvar, the most acclaimed Spanish director still working today, opened in North America theatres a year and a half ago on the 28th of June 2013. It is by far the international auteur's biggest box office hit in his home country, but received critical mixed reviews internationally, and it is not difficult to see why that is. The film features vivacious characters who exchange quick-witted banters, often referencing Spanish politics and pop culture, which the domestic audience clearly appreciates; but to non-Spanish speakers, much of the humor is unavoidably lost in translation, diminishing the film's entertainment value, which is particularly bad for *Excited!*, because to entertain is one of the main points of this film.

The story is set on a cross-continental commercial plane with a defective landing gear, circling above Spain, looking for an airport that would be ready for their imminent crash landing. However, the film never really made an effort to create a sense of danger, or even urgency. Instead, the film focuses on its ensemble cast, consisting mostly of the crew, the first class passengers and their colorful personal lives. Those individual storylines are meant to keep viewers interested and laughing much more than they are meant to make insightful points, at least on the surface level.

The film also succeeds in being an obvious but potent metaphor for the current state of affairs in Spain. A plane is forced to cycle above the Spanish airspace. Although there are many commercial airports within the Spanish airspace, most of them cannot accommodate a crash landing for a number of bureaucratic reasons. With all the red tape keeping them from finding an actual solution, the plane's crew decides to knock out the economy class passengers with muscle relaxants instead, temporarily avoiding mass panic on the aircraft. Meanwhile, the business class is being distracted with sex, drugs, a lip-syncing dance session and other generally hedonistic activities. The wealthy first class and decision-making crewmembers are also forced to make very personal, at times humiliating and incriminating phone calls that the whole plane can hear. Everything about this situation is self-explanatorily ironic.

One of the most exciting aspects of watching a Almodóvar film is never knowing what will happen next, which character is going to be in the spotlight, and where that character will take us – in term of both psychological spaces and physical settings. However, his ability to tell a story without limits is restricted in this film, as the physical space that confines the characters also narrows the possibilities for the kind of absurd plot twists we associates with Almodóvar. The storytelling device of a group of random strangers trapped in one place, each with their own motives and secrets, is also not a particularly new invention in the history of cinema.

The set design, costumes, characters and dialogs are reminiscent of another decade as well, even when topical news items such as the NSA, terrorism, the drug trade in Mexico and swindling Spanish financiers are mentioned. This must be purposeful to a

degree. However, Almodóvar probably didn't mean for the content of the film to also be dated. American viewers from the 1980s or 1990s would probably find the comedic elements of this film more humorous, and its dramatic scenarios more shocking and subversive, much more than viewers from 2013 would. This would be fine for a lesser director, as the film is definitely still sharp and relevant enough to be a retro, sassy and satirical comedy piece. But for an international renowned auteur, who is partly known for the shock value of his films, starting to look old-fashioned must be troubling to say the least.

However, even when his hands are tied, Almodóvar's quick paced narration doesn't fail to engage. Three very flamboyant flight attendants have the most screen time, and are the most entertaining to watch, especially Joserra (Javier Cámara, also from *Talk To Her*), who is pathologically incapable of lying or keeping a secret. The clueless, sexually ambiguous pilots are less fun to watch, but work well as supporting characters. The diverse group of passengers who remain awake serve as satirical representations of the behind-the-scene decision makers of Spain, more than human, multifaceted character, but that is appropriate for the purpose of this film.

Another constant merit of Almodóvar's movies is that they are big-hearted. His characters are often faced with impossible cruel situations, and are often capable of impossible cruelty themselves. But in the end, there are always sympathetic characters that will live on and strive on. That attribute is still present in *I'm So Excited!*, but its effects are lessened because the stakes aren't as high – we never really feel that the plane is in danger. Few of the characters have affecting moments, but most of them largely

remained caricatures with little emotional depth. Moreover, by the end of the movie everyone is paired up, resolving the melodramatic situations in a “happily ever after” ending that feels more than a little forced and conventional.

One of the most compelling subplots belongs to one of the business class passengers, Ricardo Galán (Guillermo Toledo) the soap opera star, and his ex-girlfriends Ruth and Alba (played respectively by Blanca Suárez and Paz Vega). Ricardo’s love life stays true to his profession – full of tired tropes and impossible contrivances, but ultimately avoided corniness through an unexpected decision by Ruth, generating one of the few truly emotionally resonate scenes of the movie. It is often the women in Almodóvar’s films who shine through in their resilience and decency, despite being human and sometimes ostensibly predictable, and provide hope to the many disturbing and hopeless scenarios that are the basis of many Almodóvar films. That is why it’s great to learn from his recent interview with *Financial Times* that the auteur’s next feature film *Silencio* will be “a return to the cinema of women, of great female protagonists,” and that “it’s a hard-hitting drama, which excites me (Almodóvar).” While it is good to be entertained, it is even better to be excited.