

Cabaret Maxime: **Reality Stripped Bare.**

“Do you love me?”

That's the very first line of dialogue uttered in Bruno de Almeida's impressionistically-sultry, *Cabaret Maxime*. You might be forgiven if you've forgotten it by the end of the film but, in a work laden with alluring ambiguity, the dynamics of the last scene will leave no doubt as to what the correct response might be. Many questions will be left unanswered – leaving room for you to fill in the blanks, as any good work of art should strive to do, and giving the film a sense that the story will continue to unfold organically elsewhere, in some parallel, celluloid universe – but not that one.

If you can pin anything concrete on *Cabaret Maxime*, it's that it has a huge heart. Although its narrative structure seems outwardly fairly straightforward, the shifting sands of the universe upon which it is built keep you guessing, engrossed in a delicious sense of debauched discovery where expectations are skewed, ultimately keeping you slightly off balance. Sure, the film offers a comforting sense of familiarity. Something to hang your proverbial consensus-reality hat on, so to speak. Yet, fundamental questions of time and space remain unanswered throughout its duration. Where are we? When is this story unfolding, exactly? There are clues, but we don't really know. The action could be taking place here or there. Everywhere and nowhere. Now or never. Does that really matter? Yes...and no. It'll be up to you to decide. What indisputably matters though is the universality the film conveys through its rich ensemble of characters and their relationships to each other, and to the intimate spaces where they retreat. These “players” are on full display in front of you. Naked, as their humanity takes center stage. This is par for the course for de Almeida – a filmmaker who is much more interested in the small, isolated islands, where the emotions capable of transforming us, inhabit, than in grand, sweeping statements. The fact that so many of the actors in *Cabaret Maxime* are the same he's used in previous projects speaks volumes. This is a continuum, where art and the personal blend effortlessly to forge a working relationship that's both intimate and mutually inspirational. It's no wonder the concept of family is so central to the film's core. It's as if de Almeida has created his very own – albeit, slightly twisted – international version of the commedia dell'arte for the world of contemporary cinema to enjoy.

Cut to New York City, mid-90s. This is where and when Bruno de Almeida starts developing the framework that will carry his film work through the next few decades. He hooks up with actors Michael Imperioli and John Ventimiglia, both of whom

eventually become regular cast members of the now-legendary TV series, *The Sopranos*, and kicks off a three-way working collaboration with them that has lasted right through *Cabaret Maxime*. He directs his first feature, *On the Run* – an eccentric little gem that's oddly reminiscent of a 70s buddy flick – starring both aforementioned actors. With gentrification as one of its main villains, It's a sort of thematic precursor to *Cabaret Maxime*. In it, we start to see the family dynamic that bleeds from screen to life, and from life to screen. It's a symbiotic relationship. Artistically incestuous. And it yields tangible results like de Almeida's later features: *The Collection*, *The Lovebirds*, *Operation Autumn*. In them, Nick Sandow (*Orange is the New Black*,) Sharon Angela (*The Sopranos*,) Drena De Niro, John Frey, all contribute, along with Imperiola and Ventimiglia. They're all friends and collaborators who step in and out of de Almeida's body of work and, eventually end up sitting together at a communal dinner table in the final scene of *Cabaret Maxime*, much as they have done innumerable times in real life, deep in the bowels of Tribeca and on the bohemian edges of Western Soho.

That New York sensibility permeates Bruno de Almeida's films. You can smell it. Like Canal Street, just before the sun rises. Yet, he hails from Portugal – where his cultural roots are firmly planted and where he spends most of his time, when he's not living in New York City. Metaphorically straddling continents and cultures, de Almeida inhabits an artistic no man's land. And that's exactly where his *Cabaret Maxime* has been built...on an abstract topographic point where the tough grit of the new world and the ritualistic degeneration of the old meet, and eventually collide. The welcoming neon sign is always on, but it blinks and crackles intermittently. As if one of its bulbs is about to spark and dangerously short-circuit. Imperiola's Bennie Gazza – whose name is a purposely ill-disguised homage to Cassavette's favorite actor – stands at the door of his establishment, at the start of the film. Impassive. An actor with a rare gift for transmitting an entire emotional cosmology just with his gaze, Imperiola gives the sense that he is ruling over his realm. Or at least keeping watch. As the camera lingers over his face, all that's missing is a deep zoom into his eyes to suggest that perhaps everything that's about to take place from this point on is only taking place in his mind. Is it? You'll have to ask de Almeida. Although it's not certain he even knows for sure.

It's worth noting that the Cabaret Maxime in *Cabaret Maxime* is loosely inspired by an actual place called...wait for it...Cabaret Maxime. The latter was a swanky venue operating in Lisbon since at least before the second world war where, legend has it, it was a haunt for both allied and German spies...Portugal being “neutral,” and all. Most recently, it had been taken over by another longtime de Almeida creative crony: an underground musician, painter and actor known for his unique brand of dada-like showmanship and corrosive sense of humor, named, Manuel Joao Vieira. He was the

musical director on the film and can be seen performing several numbers on stage. During his tenure, Vieira orchestrated a surreal world where post-punk bands, over-the-hill romantic singers and old strippers effortlessly melded as if they had the same artistic DNA. It was a glorious cultural cacophony that ultimately became the spiritual model for de Almeida's cinematic brainchild. The club was eventually taken over by developers who gentrified the space and corrupted its original intent (which they never understood) by spawning a sanitized version of a "cabaret" that was diametrically opposed to the original concept.

Bruno de Almeida's *Cabaret Maxime* represents the rarest of safe spaces. It's an enchanted world where old loyalties rule and flaws are celebrated. The gender roles it depicts have been functioning unfettered, ever since men have made up all the rules. From the filmmaker's perspective, there is no judgment. Just as there is not a hint of exploitation. This is burlesque, after all. It is what it was. There is plenty of judgment about the inexorable march of so-called "progress" and modernity, however. About its power to sometimes corrupt and destroy what is humane and decent – even though it may outwardly seem indecent. I guess that's always the excuse: "Things will be better. Change is positive." Of course, they rarely are. And it often isn't. What's good gets sacrificed at the altar of what's new, and we move forward without realizing we're actually moving backward. De-evolution at its most subtle. And at its most devastatingly brutal. What happens to *Cabaret Maxime* is emblematic of that process.

As touched upon at the beginning of this piece, we're ultimately left with the indelible impression that the film's inner truth, its one tangible expression of reality, stripped of all artifice...is love. The love of a man and a woman. The love of what once was and never again will be. The love of our relationships to physical spaces – real or imagined. The love of community. The love of imperfection. The love of contrast. The love of integrity. The love of possibility.

And, perhaps above all, the love of cinema.

Frank Coelho, December 2019