

Ladrones (Thieves 2007)

Stolen chances

A slick, well-made effort from Spanish director Jaime Marques (*El Paraíso perdido* (1999)) - writers Juan Ibáñez and Enrique López Lavigne offer an insight into the life and mind of Alex (Juan José Ballesta), a child abandoned by his kleptomaniac mother after she'd taught him how to 'lift' from passers-by, and the relationship he forms, now as a young man (with an uncanny resemblance to Matt Damon), with attractive middle-class student Sara (María Valverde), whom he promises to teach all that he knows about the fine art of street theft.

It goes without saying, of course, that there will be a price to be paid for both star-crossed lovers...

While the concept is far from original, what is pleasing here are the naturalistic, almost cold hearted performances from both leads, and the elegant dialogue, intense moods and eroticism created by David Azcano's photography and Juan Botella's art direction.

In particular, Ballesta's mature interpretation of the Álex character, a young man cut adrift from normal relationships by his own childhood, who longs to find his true place in the world - yet all he knows about human interaction is 50-50, namely the basic partnership that must exist between two thieves. For him, to steal with someone is love, and it is this poignancy that drives the heart of the movie.

The young actor's intensity, with his detached and nonchalant performance, is very well accompanied by Valverde, who makes an excellent counterpart - when sharing the screen, their chemistry negates any moral doubts on the part of the viewer as to their wrongdoing - and old hand Patrick Bauchau is similarly accomplished as the evil, controlling fence who endangers Alex in exchange for information on the whereabouts of his mother.

Have no expectations, either, of an easy resolution - this sort of life, as Marques's enjoyable, engaging film makes clear, just ain't like that.

101 mins. In Spanish.



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