

## Spanish film is almost perfect

MORTON MARCUS - Sentinel CORRESPONDENT  
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Never heard of the Spanish writer/director Alex de la Iglesia? That's not surprising. Until this week, almost none of his 10 films have been accessible in the U.S. of A. But his latest offering, "El Crimen Perfecto," should change all that. It's not only one of the best comedies of the year, it's practically an instruction manual that Hollywood, with its plethora of dismal comedies in the last decade, would do well to examine.

"Crimen" is the story of Rafael, a handsome, charming, macho salesman in charge of the ladies department of a large Madrid department store. Women sigh in his presence, men stare in envious awe of him, and he accepts their reverence like a benevolent despot.

All he covets is the soon-to-be bestowed title of floor manager as his final triumph in this world of luxury handbags, perfumes and fur coats. Vying with him for the position is Don Antonio, the short dumpy head of the men's department, who hates frivolity and charm, and Rafael.

Oh, so you think you've got this one figured out, do you? Well, guess again. Because the plot you've got in mind — which would chew away two hours of Hollywood celluloid — lasts a scant 15 minutes here.


I won't say any more about the storyline, except that its unexpected twists and turns will engross you throughout, which is what a film should do.

So many Hollywood comedies in the past decade or so have pursued the repetition of one-joke situations that we've forgotten that surprise is what engages our hearts and heads in any art form. Look at this month's release "The Man," in which Samuel L. Jackson plays a hard-nosed federal agent against Eugene Levy's bumbling twit dental-supply salesman. It's a series of predictable gags strung together in a plot we figure out while the opening credits are still scampering across the screen.

"El Crimen Perfecto," which translates in English to "The Perfect Crime," is not just a gaggle of gags, however. It's a serious comedy and a mordant commentary on the contemporary world's general grotesqueness. It parades as a spoof of our yearning for celebrity, our conspicuous materialism, our embrace of mediocrity and our following of machismo or women's lib ideals.

It is also a parody of Alfred Hitchcock thrillers, right down to the overly dramatic Bernard Hermann musical scores.

But de la Iglesia knows that parody, which is an imitation of a work of art in order to ridicule it, must not slavishly imitate the original work point for point but go off on its own storyline. This film does. It also ends with a Fellini-style grand finale for good measure.



Yes, the comedy here is broad, farcical, at times slapstick, and even crosses the border into dark comedy and tongue-in-cheek Grand Guignol horror. But this mishmash and the film's madcap unpredictability add to its charm and our delight.

As Rafael, Guillermo Toledo may join the ranks of such great European film comics as Roberto Benigni of "Life Is Beautiful" and "Down By Law" fame. Toledo and the rest of the cast, especially Monica Cervera as Lourdes, are excellent.

So is the level of filmmaking. De la Iglesia's shots and edits, as well as his clever script, enhance the comedy on all levels, accenting certain moments, speeding by or slowly passing others, or presenting dramatic tableaux in grand style.

I don't know the last time I was taken in so many ways with a comedy.

Maybe it's because de la Iglesia projects his thoughts so well on screen.

In an interview, he said the contemporary world "that surrounds me is degenerating grotesquely."

He goes on to state that he has been unable to believe in anything for a long time, and that the world he always thought was bad is worse than he imagined.

He ends the interview by saying, "Nevertheless, I cannot forget that long ago in a faraway galaxy, I believed in something. And that something makes me believe in comedy ... that does neither explain nor justify existence but ... does improve it or at least makes it more bearable. If our heads are going to be cut off, we might as well not lose the smile."

In this time of national tragedy, we need such sobering laughter.

*Morton Marcus is co-host of the TV film review program "Cinema Scene" on channel 27, every Thursday*

and Sunday at 8:30 p.m. He will lead a discussion on "Crimen Ferpecto," Saturday at the Del Mar at 1:30 p.m.

If You Go



WHAT: 'El Crimen Perfecto.'

RATED: Not rated: Could be R for strong sexual content and comic violence. (In Spanish with English subtitles.)

WHERE: Del Mar, 426-7500.

LENGTH: 1 hour, 45 minutes.

VERDICT: A.

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