

Film from Spain highlighted at festival

Northwest Film Forum presents the weeklong "Festival of New Cinema from Spain," a collection of Spanish movies completed from 2007 to 2008. It begins Friday with Félix Viscarret's surprisingly engrossing "Under the Stars."

By John Hartl
Special to The Seattle Times

Spain has been honored repeatedly at the Oscars recently, with Pedro Almodóvar collecting a couple of Academy Awards (one for best original screenplay for "Talk to Her"); the Spanish-Mexican "Pan's Labyrinth" earning three Oscars; and an Almodóvar favorite, Javier Bardem, becoming the first Spanish actor to win an Oscar (for "No Country for Old Men").

There's more where those came from, as Northwest Film Forum demonstrates today through Thursday with "Festival of New Cinema from Spain," a collection of Spanish movies completed from 2007 to 2008. Included are one documentary, a program of shorts and seven narrative features.

Director Félix Viscarret is scheduled to attend today's 8 p.m. premiere, "Under the Stars," the surprisingly engrossing story of Benito (Alberto San Juan), an anti-social Madrid trumpet player who returns to his hometown when he learns that his father is dying.

At first, Benito couldn't be more off-putting. He relieves his troubled brother of most of his cash, he ignores his father and can't cry when he dies, and he literally blows it when he's asked to play at the funeral. But when his girlfriend dumps him and he loses all ties with Madrid, he begins to take on new and unexpected responsibilities.

Although Viscarret has previously directed only shorts, he quickly demonstrates an ease with the demands of feature-length storytelling. San Juan gradually reveals the depths of a difficult character, and Violeta Rodríguez matches him as the bullied, withdrawn child who brings out his paternal instincts.

Much more experimental, but just as effective in its way, is José Luis Guerín's "In the City of Sylvia" (7 p.m. Sunday and 9:15 p.m. Monday), which at first appears to be a rather obsessive portrait of an artist as a young stalker.

When the central character finally dares to speak to the woman he's been following, the result is social catastrophe, though that's not really the point. It's Guerín's eye for visual rhymes that gives the movie its strong sense of freshness and renewal.

Another festival highlight is Carlos Bosch's nonfiction film "Septembers" (7 p.m. Wednesday and 9 p.m. Thursday), which focuses on several prisoners who compete in an "American Idol"-style singing contest that takes place every September in Spanish penitentiaries.

Bosch, whose 2003 documentary "Balseros" earned him an Academy Award nomination for best nonfiction feature, does a lovely job of drawing out the hopes and secrets of the contestants. One boy, who readily admits he was a thief, is most concerned that the other prisoners will find out that his Barcelona girlfriend is really a boyfriend.

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Split-screen techniques are used extensively in Jaime Rosales' "Solitary Fragments" (7 p.m. Tuesday and 9:15 p.m. Wednesday), in which a rural mother moves with her son to Madrid. While it's well-acted and often sharply observant (the bittersweet ending is a keeper), visual compartmentalization reaches overkill when Rosales pushes the running time past two hours.

Albert Serra's "Song of the Birds" (7:15 p.m. Wednesday and 7 p.m. Thursday) takes a documentarylike approach to the story of the Three Kings who visited Jesus. It turns out they were a very cranky trio, forever complaining about their sleeping accommodations.

Although an angel turns up, along with Joseph and Mary, absolutely nothing happens for long stretches of the 98-minute running time. The stark black-and-white images sometimes recall Pasolini's "The Gospel According to St. Matthew," but this has to be the least eventful Nativity film ever made.

Also part of the festival: a collection of shorts (5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday); "Me," Rafa Cortés' tale of a man trying to prove his innocence (7 p.m. Saturday and 7:15 p.m. Sunday); Gracia Querejeta's family drama "Seven Billiard Tables" (9 p.m. Saturday and Sunday); and Icíar Bollaín's private-investigator thriller "Mataharis" (7 p.m. Monday and 9:15 p.m. Tuesday).



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Festival preview

"Festival of New Cinema from Spain," Northwest Film Forum, 1515 12th Ave., Seattle; individual tickets are \$8.50, \$5 for members, \$6 for children and seniors; series passes are \$40, \$30 for members (206-267-5380 or www.nwfilmforum.org).