

CINEMA

Kiss of the Spider Woman

A film by Hector Babenco, starring William Hurt, Raul Julia, and Sonia Braga.

A clothes line silhouetted in a patch of sunlight on a discolored, filthy wall appears on the screen. A man is talking thickly, trance-like; we hear him but don't see him for a long time. We look around the room we're in, slowly, lingeringly. One of the ugly grey walls is hung with glamorous



Raul Julia and William Hurt in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*—a complex story of friendship, love and betrayal.

REVIEW

framed images of Rita Hayworth, Marlene Dietrich, and other bygone stars of the silver screen. The effect is bizarre. Gradually we realize we are in a small, mean prison cell. The voice is describing, of all things, a movie scene of a woman preparing for her bath.

The camera discloses prisoner Luis Molina, in makeup, all decked out in a kimono, tucking a passionate red towel turban around his head. He's posing as the heroine Leni, "a cabaret star of the highest rank." Brilliantly played by William Hurt (Best Actor, Cannes 1985), Luis Molina as the *tres flagrante* gay window dresser flaunts and struts his way right into your heart. He breathlessly relates scenes from his favorite melodrama and acts out the most romantic parts: marching under the Arc de Triomphe like the handsome German soldiers and dancing like the joyous French girls who welcome them.

Luis' antics do not impress his cellmate, a political prisoner sensitively portrayed by Raul Julia. Valentin Arregui is a journalist seriously dedicated to the revolutionary struggle (1970s Argentina?). Valentin has been tortured, he is in bad shape, and Luis wants to distract him from the pain. We, too, need to get away from the unremitting gloom of prison life; Luis' movie-within-a-movie provides comic relief.

Now we are watching a classic sepia-toned "B" grade German movie starring the narcissistic Leni, elegantly overacted by Brazilian film beauty Sonia Braga. The movie glorifies the Nazis (Leni falls in love with Werner, the tall, blonde SS officer) and depicts the Jews as foreigners so convincingly that Luis thinks they're Turks. Luis' political ignorance is more than Valentin can stand. "Your life is as trivial as your movies," Valentin says scornfully. But Luis is determined not to care about the political stuff: "I detest politics, but I'm mad about the leading man," he says. Luis really only wants to describe Leni's feelings as she dances with Werner on the verandah in the moonlight.

Thus does Hector Babenco waltz us right into the web of *The Spider Woman*, where we, too, find ourselves entangled in this suspenseful tale of politics, love, and betrayal.

"Valentin is harshly contemptuous of Molina, not for his homosexuality, but for his moist uncritical acceptance of everything. The stage is set for these two utterly dissimilar men to discover the real lineaments of masculinity, friendship, and courage."

—L.A. Times

Argentine-born director Hector Babenco (*Pixote*) is a leading light in Brazil's successful film community; he has made a blockbuster of a picture in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Brazilian novelist Manuel Puig's 1976 book on

which the film is based is described as "celebrated and idiosyncratic." Like Babenco, Puig was also born in Argentina but has lived long in Brazil. Apparently the outrageous Puig has created his most autobiographical character yet in Luis. The obviously talented American Leonard Schraeder wrote the screenplay; it couldn't be better.

The cast is terrific: William Hurt (*Big Chill*, *Body Heat*, *Altered States*), Raul Julia (*One From the Heart*), and Sonia Braga (*Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands*, *Gabriella*). The emotional

Only as Marta, a real woman, do we get a glimpse of Braga's depth. In Valentin's final fantasy, a radiant Marta takes him from the prison to the island of *The Spider Woman* ("You will not wake up in the cell," she consoles him).

The film was first shown at Cannes, where it received great critical acclaim and has been extensively reviewed since its release. *Time* magazine calls it an "infectious, sobering" film "...delighted by its own originality, its own shrewdly controlled outrageousness."

Caught in the web—a suspenseful tale of politics, love and betrayal

ambience William Hurt and Raul Julia create onscreen is exquisitely fragile, unforgettably tender. As Luis, Hurt develops all the right feelings to be utterly convincing (and endearing) as a gentle dreamer who learns to stand up for himself a little. Raul Julia is tough as Valentin, then vulnerable and human as his attitudes change. He confesses that when he is being tortured, he desires his lover Marta (educated, wealthy, upper class), not his political comrade/lover Lidia. Sonia Braga plays three roles: Leni in the Nazi movie, Valentin's girlfriend Marta, and *The Spider Woman*. Stylized, chic, and shallow, she is a perfect Leni and Spider Woman.

"What starts out as a campy, facetious catalogue of Hollywood trivia becomes an extraordinarily moving film about manhood, heroism, and love. . . . *Kiss of the Spider Woman* unfolds slowly at first: building gradually and carefully until its momentum becomes urgent and palpable. From its droll, playful opening to its transcendent coda, it has the mark of greatness from beginning to end."

—New York Times, 7/26/85

Don't miss this unusually touching picture. Intellectually challenging and emotionally gratifying, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* stays with you long after the show is over.

—Lois Wadsworth

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