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Truman (15)

dir: **Cesc Gay**

Starring: **Ricardo Darín, Javier Cámara**

Sponsor: **Richard and Linda Hall**

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Synopsis: Madrid, the present. University lecturer Tomás travels from Canada to meet his friend Julián, who is terminally ill. Over 4 days, they spend time together while Julián gets his affairs in order, visits his son in Amsterdam and also his cousin. Julián is concerned about who will look after his dog and interviews prospective new owners. At the end of his visit, Tomás agrees to take care of the dog and returns to Canada.

Since making his feature debut *Hotel Room* in 1998, Cesc Gay has proved one of Spain's most original and underrated directors, his work ranging from crisp, existentialist drama (*In the City*, 2003) to smart romantic comedy (*V.O.S* 2009). His films are concerned with the forces of modernity and their impact on traditions and conventions; his characters often find themselves caught between desires that cannot easily be satisfied and wider obligations that serve to create narrative tension and conflict. Crucially, Gay's films have 'grown' alongside him. *Nico and Dani* (2000) was a coming-of-age tale, *Fiction* (2006) a subtle study of sexual attraction and infidelity among thirty-somethings; and *A Gun in Each Hand* (2012) an interrogation of fortysomething male crisis. And now *Truman*, Gay's seventh feature, turns to mortality, as fiftysomething 'odd couple' of tested friends, played by Ricardo Darín and Javier Cámara, deal with terminal illness over four final days together.

Gay had already deployed Cámara's comic persona and Darín's everyman qualities to potent effect in the portmanteau *A Gun in Each Hand*. While *Truman* shares the lithe quality of that earlier film, there is also something here of Daniel Burman's exacting eye for the sly humour in oddball characters, which could, in lesser hands, all too easily fall into stereotype. Like Burman, Gay is very good at revealing undercurrents that are never overtly articulated. (The film is co-produced by Burman and Diego Dubcovsky's BD Cine.) Darín's Julián and Cámara's Tomás are complex beings whose humanity and mortality (wrinkled brows, sallow skin, ailments. flaws) are consistently foregrounded, and the two leads give a masterclass in unfussy, low-key acting (a shared award at San Sebastian has been followed by a Goya each.)

The film is in many ways a variation on Gay's earlier romcoms - only here, the romantic pairing is refashioned through the conventions of a buddy movie. Julián is a stage actor who, diagnosed with terminal cancer, wants to put his affairs in order; Tomás is the close friend who has returned from Canada to visit him. On the one hand, Julián is sanguine about his impending death, dragging the unprepared Tomás with him to the funeral parlour to deal with the practicalities of dying; on the other, he is



preoccupied by the spiritual aspects of what may await him, ringing the more measured Tomás in the middle of the night with questions about whether his father will be there to greet him when he gets to the gates of the world beyond.

The focus of much of Julián's concern is his aging, drooling bull-mastiff Truman, who actually appears more worn out than his dying owner. This strand of the story is played out in a number of beautifully judged scenarios defined by droll black humour. Julián interrogates the bemused vet on how his pet might be prepared to cope with his loss, propelling Tomás to the nearest bookshop in search of texts on animal psychology. Agata Roca (Gay's wife and a regular in his films) is very funny as one earnest half of the same-sex couple looking to adopt Truman; Julián insists on auditioning prospective owners for the dog, these interviews providing further revelations about his foibles and obsessions.

Julián is seeking to craft the final act of his life: "Each person dies as best they can," he insists. But not all things can be as neatly tied up as in the denouement of a play. Julián's meeting with his son Nico (Oriol Pla) sidesteps discussion of his true condition, though a final desperate embrace between them conveys what can't be said; and Tomás silently hold hands across the twin beds in the latter's hotel room in a moment of unassuming intimacy: Gay's ability to subtly reveal unspoken feelings is just one of Truman's many strengths, creating a nuanced and highly watchable tale of friendship tested through adversity.

Credits

Ricardo Darín	Julián
Javier Cámara	Tomás
Dolores Fonzi	Paula
Oriol Pla	Nico
Agata Roca	Woman 1
Director	Cesc Gay
Screenplay	Cesc Gay, Tomás Aragay
Director of Photography	Andreu Rebés
Editor	Pablo Barbieri
Music	Nico Cota, Toti Soler
Sound mixing	Jesica Suarez
Costume	Anna Güell
Art direction	Irene Montcada
	Spain/Argentina 2015. 109 mins

Another view

Call it a comedy of melancholy, and you won't be far off the mark. "Truman" Spanish filmmaker Cesc Gay's wise, wistful and well-observed film about two friends enjoying a final reunion in the shadow of impending death, is by turns amusing and affecting — and quite often both at once — as it focuses on a middle-aged actor's efforts to put his affairs in order before he faces the final curtain. It should travel far beyond the fest circuit, and find receptive audiences wherever and however it is shown, for it speaks, gently yet directly, in a universal language.

"Each person dies as best he can." That's how Julian (Ricardo Darin, "The Secret in Their Eyes") sums up his attitude as he faces his imminent demise in his adopted home base of Madrid. An Argentine transplant, he evidently has enjoyed years of steady of employment, if not superstardom, as a working actor in Spanish film and stage productions. Now that he has been confronted with a real-life plot twist — a diagnosis of terminal cancer — he has opted to write his own last act by foregoing additional treatments that his doctor admits will only delay the inevitable.

Enter Tomas (Javier Camara), Julian's longtime buddy, now a college instructor in Canada. Julian is welcoming, but also a bit wary, when Tomas unexpectedly arrives for a visit. He suspects, and not without cause, that his friend has flown in to talk him into resuming cancer treatments. But Tomas realizes early on — obviously not for the first time in their relationship — that he's unable to change his friend's mind once it is firmly set.

And so the two men spend what each of them knows will be a kind of last holiday together, dividing their time over a four-day period between long conversations in bars and cafes (where Tomas always picks up the tab) and Julian's sporadic attempts to tie up loose strings before he makes his exit. Julian is especially concerned about what might happen to Truman, his faithful, sad-eyed boxer — he even questions a veterinarian as to whether dogs grieve when their masters pass away — and spends an inordinate amount of time "auditioning" new owners for his pet. (A pet, it should be noted, who doesn't appear all that much longer for this world than his master.)

"Truman" proceeds along a rambling path at a leisurely tread, with occasional detours (including an impulsive visit to Amsterdam to visit Julian's college-age son) and sporadic rest stops. But the passing of time rarely makes itself felt, for director Gay, working from a screenplay he co-wrote with Tomas Aragay, gives his audience such personable traveling companions for this seriocomic journey.

Darin gives a slyly robust performance as Julian, vividly conveying the profoundly mixed emotions of a man who, after a lifetime of excess and misbehavior, has only recently begun to feel unfamiliar pangs of regret. At times, Julian seems almost comically eager to make amends for past deeds, such as when he apologizes to an acquaintance for wrecking his marriage by sleeping with the guy's wife. (As it turns out, Julian may have done the guy a favor.) At other times, however, he sounds bitterly resentful that his illness makes others uncomfortable. "People don't know what to say to me," he tells Tomas, sounding more sad than angry. "They smell death, and they get scared."

As Julian struggles — largely successfully — to maintain his air of good-humored but steel-willed resignation, Darin smoothly maneuvers through a gauntlet of mood swings, offering only fleeting glimpses of the anxiety behind the determined front. Camara's more low-key portrayal of Tomas is as apt and effective counterpoint, so that Tomas serves as sounding board and

sympathetic onlooker (and, yes, audience surrogate) while at the same time registering his own emotional turmoil as he bids a long goodbye to a treasured friend.

Excellent supporting players orbit around the two stars of "Truman." Among the standouts: Dolores Fonzi as Julian's deeply concerned but not infinitely patient sister; Javier Gutierrez as a briskly efficient mortuary sales representative in the film's most darkly comical sequence; and Jose Luis Gomez as the theatrical producer who reluctantly fires Julian from his current, and likely final, acting gig.

Lenser Andreu Rebes gives Madrid — and Amsterdam — a warmly inviting, even romantic look, as though he were suggesting that, all things considered, some places are more attractive than others when you are choosing the locations for your grand finale.

Joe Leydon, Variety

Our next screening - Friday February 17th

The Commune (Denmark 2016. Cert 15)

In the wake of his father's death, Erik inherits an enormous Copenhagen property and wants to cash in on the million kroner it's worth. His bored wife, Anna and adolescent daughter, Freya are in need of adventure and usher in a new chapter in lives that have become humdrum, by inviting a gaggle of others to join them under their expansive roof. But the post-1960s idealism of collective living does not prove to be all sunshine and roses for those involved.

Thomas Vinterberg's new film is inspired by his own experiences of a similar lifestyle in 1970s Copenhagen.

Programme news

The three films to fill the gaps in the season are

March 31st - The Clan (Argentina/Spain 2016. Cert 15)

April 21st - Under the Shadow (UK/Qatar/Jordan/Iran 2016. Cert 15)

May 6th - Julieta (Spain 2016. Cert 15)

These titles are subject to confirmation. Full details will be provided soon.

Please note the change of date for Julieta. The original date as published in the programme (May 5th) is no longer available. The film will still start at 7.30pm.