



FILM

ROMA



OUT 14 DECEMBER
CERT TBC / 135 MINS

DIRECTOR Alfonso Cuarón
CAST Yalitza Aparicio, Marina de Tavora, Marco Graf, Daniela Demesa

PLOT In early 1970s Mexico City, a family and their two housekeepers live an ordinary life. When a series of events threatens to disrupt their existence, maid Cleo (Aparicio) must preserve the peace, while also dealing with her own dilemmas.

A POST-APOCALYPTIC future, a low-Earth orbit space station and a school for wizards: Alfonso Cuarón's recent filmography has been, by any standard, pretty otherworldly. *Roma* is in every sense a more grounded affair for the director, a low-key domestic drama about an ordinary middle-class Mexican family in the 1970s.

And yet, with a confidence and ambition that again solidifies his status in the very top tier of modern filmmakers, the director deftly sprinkles the magical into this astonishingly authentic, honest portrait of humans living and coexisting. Indeed, it might be his best film yet.

Set in the Roma district of Mexico City where the director grew up, and centred on a middle-class household that painfully recreates his own formative years, it is by all accounts deeply autobiographical. But in an act of artistic humility, Cuarón's focus is not on a young Cuarón. Instead, it's on Cleo (Aparicio), one of two live-in maids for a busy, noisy, happy family of six. We learn her routine intimately, from the elegant opening titles of a driveway being mopped clean of dogshit (a pleasingly recurring motif), to the evening ritual of the four kids being lovingly put to bed.

Sometimes in these early moments, it feels like nothing happens at all. One sweetly realised scene sees the family literally just watch TV. Cleo joins them, maternally cuddling one of the kids and sharing in the simple joy — at least until

told to clear the plates away. There's a dash of *Upstairs, Downstairs* in the contrasts of class and race, but Cuarón never condescends and recognises the nuance in that relationship: even as she occasionally reproaches her employee, the mother Sofia (de Tavora) always acknowledges Cleo's importance to the family.

It's shot in black-and-white, which at first glance lends it a classical and neorealist feel. There's undoubtedly a conscious influence of Fellini — his flair, flamboyancy and profound sense of feeling is all there. (By neat coincidence the Italian master also made a semi-autobiographical film called *Roma*.) But the monochrome here is less nostalgic affectation, more thrilling innovation. Each frame is crisp and rich, using a high dynamic range and an unusually deep depth of field. The effect is jaw-dropping. It's not hyperbolic to rate it as being among the most beautiful photography ever committed to screen. Life spills into the frame, from the comforting familiarity of the family home (where a fixed camera pans gracefully between rooms, like an

Dinner time in 1970s Mexico. Not an Arctic Roll in sight.

unjudging observer) to the dazzling later set-pieces as the pace picks up (a forest fire, a student riot, a beach accident). The camerawork makes everything feel hyper-real: more dream than documentary.

Cuarón has always loved challenging the boundaries of technical innovation — his favourite flourish, the unbroken single-take, is present and correct here — but, more so than in the flashier *Gravity* or grittier *Children Of Men*, this has real soul to it. Aided in no small part by Aparicio's stunning debut performance, there is a devastating emotional coda that will wrongfoot you, and still leave you feeling buoyant. Perhaps *Roma*'s most impressive feat is its humanism: its understanding of the chaos of life, and its unerring respect for those who meet that chaos with love. Really, *Roma* feels like a celebration of what it means to feel alive. **JOHN NUGENT**

VERDICT Pairing thrilling technical prowess with profound artistic vision, Alfonso Cuarón has made a masterpiece, at once understated and otherworldly. We need more filmmakers like him.



He could have made effort for the street's '70s soirée.

WHITE BOY RICK



OUT 7 DECEMBER
CERT 15 / 111 MINS

DIRECTOR Yann Demange
CAST Richie Merritt, Bel Powley, Matthew McConaughey, Jennifer Jason Leigh

PLOT The based-on-fact story of Detroit teenager Richard Wershe Jr (Merritt), aka 'White Boy Rick', who became a drug dealer and FBI informant, much to the concern of his small-time arms dealing dad (McConaughey).

RICHARD WERSHE JR is the very embodiment of the phrase "too much too young". As the facts of his rather crazy, real-life case aren't widely known, we won't go into the full details; suffice to say, the kid known as White Boy Rick didn't so much come of age as headlong crash into it.

It's a fascinating story — high-school drop-out joins a Detroit drug gang and informs on them for the FBI — and ripe material for director Yann Demange, who dealt with another young man in a very different hostile urban environment with 2014's *'71*. But with more ground to cover, *White Boy Rick* is a far less focused story than Demange's searing Belfast-set debut, so anyone hoping for something that matches *'71*'s explosive intensity may be disappointed. *White Boy Rick*'s straightforwardly chronological approach offers the best way to package its surprises, but it also means it drags in places, especially toward the end, where empathy for its protagonist threatens to slide into mawkishness.

Still, there is much to appreciate, like Demange's attentive recreation of '80s Detroit: a grim world of rat-infested

decay and everyday lawbreaking, but also a vibrant musical hub where roller discos throbbed to the heavy, energising pulse of electro and hip hop. It is also replete with fine performances, from the likes of Bel Powley (as Rick's addict sister) and Bruce Dern (as his craggy gramps), and not least Matthew McConaughey, who strips away his rugged charms to reveal an impressively weaselly side as greasy "low-life" Rick Wershe Sr. He's a man whose blend of optimism, self-confidence and broken moral compass make him the worst possible advert for the American Dream. Like a Midwestern Del Boy, Rick Sr flogs assault rifles out the back of his car and announces every year as the one he'll make it big... By setting up a VHS rental store.

It's a shame we don't see more of him, but while the film pokes at the malign effect of this particular father-son relationship, it's less about the connection between Ricks Sr and Jr than it is Jr's own trials — which squarely foregrounds newcomer Richie Merritt. Perhaps it is just how the real Rick was, but there is a lumpen blandness to the character and Merritt's performance, which makes him the least interesting to spend time with, despite the incredible events that befall him. He's reminiscent of James Frecheville's similarly crime-plagued adolescent in David Michôd's *Animal Kingdom*: a kid who would actually be quite dull and forgettable, but for the life-threatening situations he finds himself in.

Of course, his any-teen normality only heightens the effect of his abnormally hazardous situation. But it is a challenge for any audience when the main character is, ultimately, the one you're least excited to hang out with. **DAN JOLIN**

VERDICT A patchy follow-up to the searing *'71* from director Yann Demange, but one which tells a compelling true story and offers a treat of a supporting turn from Matthew McConaughey.