

REVIEW

Review of Alain Guiraudie's dark comedy *Miséricorde* (Misericordia)

2024, CG Cinéma/Scala Films, 102 min

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With its streaming release on the *Criterion Channel* (criterionchannel.com/misericordia) coinciding with a successful festival run at Telluride, Toronto and New York in early Fall 2024, Alain Guiraudie's latest dark comedy *Miséricorde* was met with as great acclaim in North America as it was the previous spring in France. Garnering 2024 film of the year honors by *Cahiers du Cinéma* and the prestigious Louis Delluc Prize (having also received nominations at both the César and the Lumière Awards ceremonies), Guiraudie's enigmatic thriller is a slow boil that is worthy of the long Gallic tradition of mordant humor, barely subdued violence and police intrigue of the *Série noire*.

Taking the viewer on a point-of-view road trip from Toulouse to his native Aveyron and into the fictional Occitan village of Saint-Martial across the opening credits, as we navigate the narrow, quiet streets of the town alongside the film's still unknown protagonist, Guiraudie presents us with for sale placards, few signs of life and, finally, a shuttered bakery, at which the car and the camera stop to introduce the film's title in a spartan black and white, "Miséricorde." Over the ensuing scenes, we learn that Jérémie (Félix Kysyl), our earlier travel companion, has returned to his hometown for the funeral of Jean-Pierre Rigal, the village baker under whom he had formerly apprenticed. Having left Saint-Martial for urban Toulouse and a career in industrial baking, the unmarried and unattached Jérémie has now been unemployed for several months and his return to the village has him ostensibly considering a return to the bread ovens of his youth. In addition to his new itinerant status, Jérémie's sudden presence in the village, as well as his sexuality and even his sexual motivations are quickly called into question by his acquaintances. While Jean-Pierre's widow, Martine (played masterfully by decorated French actress Catherine Frot of *Le Dîner de cons*, *Haute cuisine* and *Marguerite* fame), attempts to convince Jérémie to stay as long as he would like, her choleric, married son Vincent (Jean-Baptiste Durand), a former classmate, assumes the worst of their guest – that he is there to take advantage of her financially, if not amorously.

With slow pacing, Vincent's stalking of the laconic Jérémie includes pre-dawn visits to the former's childhood bedroom, where the latter has taking temporary residence, as well as several menacing appearances in his daily wanderings, which involve visits to another classmate, the now alcoholic Walter (David Ayala), who is puzzled, not remembering them as being friends, and this mistrust ultimately builds to a fever pitch. When Vincent forbids Jérémie from continuing to frequent his mother, banishing him from Saint-Martial, our protagonist refuses and a fierce fight ensues. At its climax, Jérémie shockingly kills Vincent and carefully buries his body in the woods, nearby a popular mushroom-hunting area, offering the second half of the film an entirely different tenor.

Nothing truly is ever as it seems in *Miséricorde* and, as the film shifts from speculation and impending peril to cover up and foreboding discovery, all of the villagers become unwitting pawns in Jérémie's alibi. Often returning to the scene of the crime, pretending to be hunting for mushrooms,

Jérémie is discovered by the village priest (Jacques Develay) frantically removing mushrooms that have sprouted in a ring around the place he buried Vincent. Having originally encountered this character offering a seemingly heartfelt eulogy at the baker Jean-Pierre's funeral, the viewer is stunned to learn of the clergyman's willingness to dissemble the act he appears so sure to know occurred, making himself complicit, even going as far as to tamper with the investigation of two less-than-commendatory gendarmes. In so doing, he offers the grace and mercy – the *miséricorde* from the film's title – in exchange for companionship he so ardently desires from Jérémie.

What is unspoken in this plot summary and review is the ubiquitous – and oft hilarious – eroticism that pervades the film. Carnal desire can be surmised, but rarely proven, between the fluid Jérémie and the departed Jean-Pierre, Jérémie and Vincent, Jérémie and Martine, Jérémie and the priest and even Jérémie and Walter. In an interview with Leonardo Goi for *Reverse Shot*, Guiraudie admits that he set out to create “an erotic film without relying on or showing sexual acts.”¹ Instead, sublimated lust amid the closed networks of rural life are key elements of the film's overall mood. Still, even if sexuality is neither depicted nor implied in this film, male nudity, especially that of unconventional bodies – a hallmark of Guiraudie's filmmaking since the 2013 *L'inconnu du lac* (Stranger by the Lake) – is a striking feature in *Miséricorde* as well.

In his interview that accompanies the Criterion release, Guiraudie references Bergman as an inspiration, which is clear from the pacing and sublimation of desire. He also cites Dostoyevsky for the religious symbolism and ideas of grace. Considering the pervading atmosphere of foreboding, the attempted cover-ups of a crime, its earthy rural setting and the unexpected twists the narrative takes – not to mention the poster for the film (included above), another model would seem to be his own countryman Henri-Georges Clouzot. Regardless of its references, *Miséricorde* is a subtle, modern and refreshingly French entry into the realm of dark comedy, one that allows violence and mercy, doubt and companionship to coexist in interesting ways.

Notes

¹ Cf. <https://reverseshot.org/reviews/entry/3258/guiraudie> – he repeats this, in French, in a “Meet the Filmmaker” interview included with the film's Criterion Channel release: criterionchannel.com/misericordia/videos/alain-guiraudie-interview.