

romántico

a film by
Mark Becker

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By John Anderson



No one would pick Carmelo Muñoz Sanchez, itinerant mariachi singer and champion of his own lost cause, as a romantic movie hero. Yet, in Mark Becker's beautiful, intimate "Romántico" he is exactly that. Becker, creating an intimate portrait of downtrodden nobility, follows singer-guitarist Sanchez and his alcoholic partner, Arturo, as they play the streets and restaurants of San Francisco, living six to an apartment and sending what little they can afford to back to their families in Mexico. Becker also follows them home, where we are made witness to the sacrifices made, the burdens borne and the inequities of North American economics rendered as poignantly as a Mexican love song. Shot on actual 16mm film, **"Romántico" is visual poetry on the run and, as any work of art does when it's successful, improves our perceptions of the world:** No one who sees "Romántico" for what it is will likely ever again brush off a strolling musician, bypass a handbill or lobby for a border wall. Directed by Mark Becker. 1:20. In Spanish with English subtitles. In Manhattan at the IFC Center, Greenwich Village.

slant magazine

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By Ed Gonzalez

Mark Becker's Romántico may be the documentary of the year. This sensitively detailed surveillance of one man's personal misfortune illuminates a national crisis, complementing Carlos Reygadas's *Battle in Heaven*; though both films share the same social setting, it's their vigilant aesthetic that most unites them. The film begins in San Francisco as an elegy to the departed, where Mexican immigrants Carmelo Muñoz Sánchez and his friend Arturo Arias strum their guitars for gringos in the city's restaurant rows. A couple asks that they play music that is "happy, romántico"—a request that comes easy for Carmelo given his poet's heart. The man's past, like his responsibility to his wife and children, weighs on his soul, and this pressure is evident in his songs, the tenor of his voice, and a face that has been pummeled by years of disappointment. Becker's subtle visual touches, like a close-up on a pay phone's buttons, casually stress Carmelo's distance from his family, just as a series of slo-mo footage is meant to convey the slog of having to work in order to live. (The film, interestingly, ends with a funeral procession.) Back in Mexico, Carmelo struggles with God, asking him to spare his mother any more pain. Carmelo's visit to the woman, who is now legless and hard of hearing, is a painful thing to watch, but what is most remarkable about this moment is Becker's reserve behind the camera. The filmmaker is sensitive but never gushing, smart but never aloof, and his use of montage suggests, like the music of his subject, a poet's imagination. (Note the scene where the camera pans to the left of Carmelo in order to reveal Arturo walking by his side, just as the former reveals the pleasure of having his friend return to Mexico.) Implicit in Carmelo's struggles, like selling nieves—a local ice cream—around town (in part to raise enough money for his older daughter's quinceañera), is a critique of the powers that burden people like Carmelo. But the film is, above all, a portrait of an artist as an old man—a good man who reveals, through tears that run along the deep lines in his face, how he gives free nieves to children who remind him of himself as a child, with tattered clothes and no money in their pockets. Would that capitalism were as kind and forgiving.

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