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As in Pasolini, Ferrara gives us insight into his protagonist's inner life through glimpses of
his work-in-progress—in this case through voice-over readings and storyboard sketches
and YouTube reference clips from the then-in-preproduction Ferrara-Dafoe Siberia. All of
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ABOUT THE FILM

Abel Ferrara's first dramatic feature since 2014's Pasolini re-teams the filmmaker and his frequent lead Willem Dafoe, who delivers a career-best performance as the title character, an older American expat living in Rome with his young wife and their daughter. Disoriented by his past misgivings and subsequent, unexpected blows to his self-esteem, Tommaso wades through this late chapter of his life with an increasingly impaired grasp on reality as he prepares for his next film. Tommaso is easily Ferrara and Dafoe's most personal and engrossing collaboration to date, a delicately surrealistic work of autofiction marked by the keen sensitivity of two consummate artists.

115 min. | Italy/UK/USA/Greece | 2019

Ready, Willem and Abel
by Nick Pinkerton

The following is an excerpt of an article originally published by Artforum, June 8, 2020

There is a certain species of fecund artist from whom work seems to flow in abundance, like a natural byproduct of their existence. In literature there are the Simenons and Honoré de Balzacs; in pop music, the Chief Keefs and Mark E. Smiths. Various popular cinemas through the years have supported such prolificity—think '3os Hollywood or '8os Hong Kong—though as the mechanisms of production became more onerous in America, it became the provenance of independents and experimental filmmakers, from Stan Brakhage to Kevin Jerome Everson. In the latter-day commercial cinema, a business of house-of-cards financing schemes and endless practical exigencies, the super-producers are the rarest of the rare, with perhaps the best-known of the last half-century being R.W. Fassbinder, who of his frenzied output said, "I would like to build a house with my films. Some are the cellars, others the walls, still others the windows. But I hope in the end it will be a house."

Abel Ferrara, who completed his first feature—a porno called 9 Lives of a Wet Pussy—in 1976, hasn't quite equaled Fassbinder in architectural output in the subsequent years, but it may be noted that the two men are united in their combining workaholism with other extralegal addictions. Fassbinder burnt out from the mixture back in 1982, while Ferrara, following a long stretch in which his voracious appetite for illicit substances was a matter of public knowledge, survived long enough to get sober, around 2010; the title of his 2017 documentary Alive in France bears more than a little trace of astonishment. Through the years of debauchery, Ferrara never stopped working, but his last decade—almost all of it spent living in Rome—has been marked by an explosion of creative activity accompanied by an unexpected bump in visibility for a quintessential outsider artist. [...]

Tommaso stars Willem Dafoe, who has worked with Ferrara in the past and since (their Siberia was in the main competition at this year's Berlin International Film Festival). Dafoe plays, in the title role, an American filmmaker living in Rome, like Ferrara. Like Ferrara, Tommaso is a recovering addict, a regular attendee of N.A. meetings. Like Ferrara, whom I have had occasion to observe in mid-shoot in recent years, he quaffs from an omnipresent bottle of mineral water, a substitute for more potent libations. Like Ferrara, he has a Moldavian wife some years his junior, and with his wife a very young daughter, parts played respectively by Ferrara's wife, Cristina Chiriac, met on the set of Pasolini; and his daughter, Anna Ferrara. The apartment they occupy is that of the Ferrara family, making this very much a "home movie" in the Cassavetes sense.

The film à clef is nothing new to Ferrara—after starring himself as an angry, anguished artist in 1979's The Driller Killer, he has populated his films with several characters who could be read as on-screen alter egos, the most transparent of these the New York City–based filmmaker Eddie Israel, played by Harvey Keitel in 1993's Dangerous Game, which features Ferrara's then-spouse, Nancy, in the role of Israel's wife. [...] As a prismatic portrait of a filmmaker, Tommaso might be considered a spiritual sequel to both Dangerous Game and Pasolini, though its central character is a far less gloomy figure than Pasolini, less pugnacious than Israel. While Ferrara's films are often remembered for their violent outbursts, he's also a wonderful director of quiet interludes, and these make up a large part of Tommaso, which describes in intent detail the contours of a sixtysomething expatriate filmmaker's everyday existence as seen through the smooth Steadicam strokes of a widescreen frame. We see Tommaso taking Italian lessons, going to market, helping his wife with dinner, taking his daughter to the park, changing the lightbulb on a reading lamp. We see him attending N.A. meetings, where he listens to people's stories of addiction and tells his own: a catastrophic tale from a Miami location shoot that almost certainly refers to The Blackout (1997). We also see him giving acting lessons to a classroom of young Italians and practicing yoga stances that evidently require a great deal of strength and training, moments which seem closer to Dafoe than to Ferrara—both men live in Rome and are only a few years apart in age, and the film has the feeling of being an almost symbiotic collaboration. [...]
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