

## **Francesco Munzi's drama reveals the alliances and lethal questions of honor that disturbingly survive among Calabria's mafia clans.**

**A trio of brothers with three different outlooks converge on their ancestral town, where a blood feud threatens to turn into all-out war, in Francesco Munzi's "Black Souls." Calabria's mafia, the 'ndrangheta, have international reach, but their vendettas play out at home, allowing Munzi to illustrate urban-rural divides while showing how alliances and lethal questions of honor disturbingly survive in areas where options have never been a government priority. Carefully constructed, allowing each scene to develop, "Souls" is set to be this year's mafia pic; how it fares at the box office will depend on international and local auds' seemingly insatiable appetite for the subject.**

Much of the film was shot in Africo, a small town in the toe of Italy that's long been synonymous with the forsaken south, and well known as a stronghold of the 'ndrangheta. This is the hometown of the Carbone family, goat herders whose paterfamilias was killed sometime in the past. The opening, however is in Amsterdam, where Luigi (Marco Leonardi) and his lieutenant Nicola (Stefano Priolo) arrange with South American drug lords for a large shipment of cocaine.

Luigi's older brother, Luciano (Fabrizio Ferracane), lives with wife, Antonia (Anna Ferruzzo), in Africo Vecchio, a largely abandoned hamlet perched on a rocky hilltop, where they tend the family farm and stay clear of the clan's illegal activities. Yet son Leo (Giuseppe Fumo) has little respect for his dad, instead looking up to uncles Luigi and Rocco (Peppino Mazzotta), whose big-shot mafiosi lives are seductive to a teen with no prospects. Annoyed with a local bar owner, Leo shoots the place up at night and then hops a train to Milan, where he stays with uncle Rocco and his wife Valeria (Barbora Bobulova).

Seeing Rocco and Valeria in their home, expensively furnished with antiques and period-style pieces, auds can clearly categorize the three brothers. Rocco dresses in clean-cut Milanese style, and elegant Valeria, who doesn't speak the dialect of her inlaws, is the type of mafia wife from outside the clans; she's well aware that her husband is involved but doesn't want to know the details. In contrast, Luciano hasn't forsaken his peasant origins in look or lifestyle, while Luigi falls between the two, more friendly goon than

citified criminal or hard-working man of the land.

Leo's childish attack on the bar disturbs the Carbones' rivals, the Barracas, who demand the young man get a good scolding from his family. It so happens the Barracas were responsible for the Carbones' father's death, and while Luciano tries to calm the situation, simmering resentment is nearing boiling point.

As mafia plots go, "Black Souls" doesn't veer far from its significant number of predecessors — there's even a strip-club shot that could have been lifted from "The Sopranos." Unlike "Gomorra," the film isn't aiming for a connect-the-dots approach in which petty henchmen of the Camorra are seen as part of a global network; the Amsterdam scene here is almost superfluous, a mere nod to the 'ndrangheta's offshore scope. Instead, Munzi focuses on incongruous leftovers from a benighted past, where kinship and blood feuds in a marginalized corner of rural Italy fester until entire communities are drawn into a whirlpool of intimidation and violence. This is the film's strong suit, uncovering the feudal nature of honor and the ways in which a rash act precipitates not just one murder, but a never-ending string of killings passed from generation to generation. In a locale where spitting on authority is a point of principle, everyone thinks they can be kingmaker if not king.

Thematically, it's possible to make a connection to Munzi's previous (and underappreciated) "The Rest of the Night," which looks at how marginalized people (immigrants) with no hope of improving their situation resort to criminality. In "Black Souls," mafia ties appear to be the only way young men from rural Calabria, a region ignored for centuries, can imagine an improved life: Rocco's fancy digs, sleek black Mercedes and elegant wife are proof, yet the peasant core is never completely submerged.

The ensemble cast, including newcomer Fumo, is well cast in terms of talent and physiognomy, with special mention going to Ferracane, whose increasingly helpless Luciano is the pic's true tragic heart. Scenes are allowed to build slowly, and while at first the narrative seems difficult to fully grasp, the elements all fall into place. Visuals by Munzi's regular d.p. Vladan Radovic bring out the darker colors, literally and figuratively, of the story, and there's little glamification of the 'ndrangheta lifestyle. Though it's only visible for a few seconds, attentive auds should notice in the final, powerful sequence the unfinished staircase Luciano ascends, leading into a house apparently completed decades ago. Like the frequent long shots of Africo Vecchio's ruined homes, moldering on the hillside, the implication of interruption and destruction is never far

away.