

## **Starring a strong Alba Rohrwacher, Laura Bispuri's debut feature is a solemn, sensitive study of transgender reversal.**

**The rising profile of transgender issues in popular culture could clear an arthouse path for Laura Bispuri's sensitive, deliberate debut feature, "Sworn Virgin," though it's not a film that actively advertises its own topicality. Set instead within a fascinating subset of Albanian society where female-to-male gender transition is a tradition as old as the snow-blasted Alpine hills, Bispuri's film stars an effectively cast Alba Rohrwacher as a rural woman who, after living as a man for 14 years, embarks on an uncertain path to reclaim her original identity. That narrative arc could leave "Virgin" vulnerable to accusations of cultural conservatism, but the potential for ensuing debate works to its advantage — provided auds are patient enough to forgive a few storytelling lulls.**

Rather than explaining upfront via wordy title cards — as many filmmakers might be inclined to do — Bispuri allows her audience to piece together the specifics of Albania's *burrnesha* (sworn virgin) tradition through observation and implication, before the practice is discussed more directly midway through the pic's two-track narrative. Under the region's established code of social behavior, known as the Kanun, a woman may forswear her female identity to live and pose as a man, taking a vow of life-long chastity in the process. In exchange, she is exempt from the strictly servile role prescribed for women by the Kanun — an oath that essentially amounts to the exchange of one set of sexual liberties for another. Working from a novel by Elvira Dones, Bispuri and co-writer Francesca Manieri don't pass explicit judgment on a custom born out of more problematically ingrained sexism; the script's perspective is more anthropological than political.

Yet for Hana (Rohrwacher), known in her male guise as Mark, it's clear that her compromised freedom is palling. Thirty-odd years into a life lived entirely in a remote Northern Albanian village, tucked away in the unprepossessingly named Mountains of the Damned, the right to drink alcohol and carry a rifle only counts for so much. Meanwhile, the memory of her estranged sister, Lila (Flonja Kodheli), who escaped to urban Italy 14 years ago for a conventional heterosexual marriage, serves as a constant what-if reminder of a path not taken. Leaving home for the first time, Hana falls on the mercy of

the flummoxed Lila, whose teenage daughter, Jonida (Emily Ferratello), is particularly wary of this unannounced (and evidently never explained) family arrival.

The sisters' nervous but affectionate reunion, coupled with the relaxed gender protocol of her new environment, encourages Hana to tentatively pursue a reversal of her vows — though her sexual inquiries aren't best answered by Lila's caught-off-guard reply that intercourse is an acquired taste akin to raki liquor. Hana's present-day journey is braided with flashbacks to the sisters' unhappy adolescence in the village, shedding light on the oppressive circumstances that drove each young woman to an alternate identity of sorts. It's an elegant device, tracing the building and gradual dismantling of Hana's masculine alter ego in parallel, though one that works against the film's dramatic momentum — the back-and-forth continues for some time after the dots have been joined.

Some viewers may feel that Hana's rejection of transgender life amounts to an endorsement of traditional gender definitions, though given that her choice was led by a system of forced gender inequality, the situation is more complex than that; the film's feminist undertow is easier to parse. Taking on yet another role that prompts nudging comparisons to Tilda Swinton — cinema's reigning queen of alternative identities, and Rohrwacher's "I Am Love" mother — the actress deftly assists the film's ambiguities, carefully playing Hana/Mike as a person who never seems quite comfortable in either skin. If she scarcely looks more manly in her bowl cut and denim jacket than Barbra Streisand did in "Yentl," that's surely the point; her inflections of swagger, even as she embarks on a return to womanhood, are affecting for appearing so studied.

Tech credits are highly polished, with Vladan Radovic's stately, rich-hued widescreen lensing attuned both to the austere regional beauty of the village and the scruffier warmth of the city; neither setting comes out entirely on top. Nando Di Cosimo's mournful, strings-keening score could perhaps have been taken down a notch; "Sworn Virgin" already wears its serious intent on its unisex shirtsleeve.