

THE SECRET IN THEIR EYES, a review by Nancy Martz

Writer/Director Juan Jose Campanella from the novel by Eduardo Sacheri

Academy Award for Best Foreign Film

Showing at CHEZ ARTISTE

A savage rape and killing of a beautiful, young, newly wed school teacher in Buenos Aires has haunted Inspector Benjamin Esposito for a quarter century, and in his retirement, he tries to write about it in a novel. The perpetrator, though discovered, had been quickly pardoned by the corrupt judicial system of the 70's, the age of the Disappeared Ones. Thugs like him were useful at that time in keeping critics of the Argentine political tyranny silent. The victim's surviving spouse is banker Pablo Morales, who now in 2000 is living in the country in isolation, and though he had once appreciated the inspector's devotion to justice, he now throws Esposito out of his house and his life, admonishing him to "go dwell on the case in your own house....If you live in the past, you'll have a thousand pasts and no future." These words are one of the film's many haunting secrets that startle into openings at the end of the movie, and this one for its horrific clarity.

As Esposito dreams of that time in the 70's, he wakes in the dark to scrawl words onto a notepad. "Te mo" he writes, " I fear you." It's one letter "A" away from writing "Te amo," I love you, and now we have the clues to more secrets, for the film floats along on remote love and jars along on palpable fear. It swamps us with sordid flashbacks and fadings to black that could mean the end of the movie. But there is more. More killing takes place in a loyal sacrifice to friendship, and love meets again with its object. Esposito's partner, Detective Sandoval, provides comic relief as well as novel theories that could bust the perpetrator, but Sandoval's passion is drinking martinis close to oblivion. Esposito's boss, high-born Attorney Irene, provides the unattainable love interest as well as power to indict or close the case, the latter which would please her higher ups. But Irene's passion is being appointed a judge. Happy conclusions seem possible only in a work of fiction, but Esposito is incapable of crafting inaccuracies, and so is stumped from completing his novel.

Suddenly, in a twist from her erstwhile aristocratic and ambitious character, Irene constructs an intensely indecorous trap for the perpetrator that breaks his silence but astounds the wordless Esposito. Perhaps the longings for justice, for vengeance, for love simmering below the surface may yet out. But can we be sure? David Denby of the *New York Times* is one of many critics praising this film. He calls it "labyrinthine...with corners and passageways that will be discussed by movie goers for hours afterward." The film's screen writer and director, Juan Jose Campanella, says of it: "An old man eating alone...haunted me. How does someone end up all alone in life...eating alone with no one.... My aim was to tell this story...of small beings wandering through a sea of people...lost in the crowd--and their eyes."

If I were you, I would see this movie twice. First, alone, so that I could linger awhile in its world; later, with a friend who has time afterward to talk.