

Beatriz at Dinner: Not the sort of resistance that amounts to much

By Joanne Laurier
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Directed by Miguel Arteta; screenplay by Mike White

It is an almost inescapable fact of life these days that Hollywood shows its very weakest side in summertime, prior to launching in the fall what it considers more substantial films designed to attract various award nominations.

Although it may only *seem* that this year's output is more miserable than ever, that is cold comfort when one is faced with the appalling and embarrassing reality: *Spider-Man: Homecoming*; *Despicable Me 3*; *Baby Driver*; *Transformers: The Last Knight*; of course, the incomparable *Captain Underpants*; and so forth.

Signs of serious thought in present-day American popular drama will most likely be found on a television monitor, not at a Cineplex. So, when a vaguely socio-critical film hits the big screen, one shuffles off to a matinee, thus minimizing the out-of-pocket pain.

But there's another kind of pain to endure in watching *Beatriz at Dinner*, directed by Miguel Arteta (born 1965 in Puerto Rico), a film that features a New Age-like protest against a Trump-like figure. Arteta's work exemplifies an especially helpless and impotent type of petty bourgeois antagonism to the billionaire parasites insatiably gorging themselves.

The film opens with someone, presumably the central character, Beatriz, at a younger age and in another country, paddling through a mangrove swamp, where she comes upon a pure white goat—possibly a stand-in for the “Lamb of God” of Christian theology.

When Arteta's movie properly gets going, Beatriz, a Mexican immigrant, middle-aged and living in Los Angeles, is now a “healer” in tune with the wider universe. In her bedroom sleep the loves of her life: a goat and two dogs. She had another goat—until it was strangled by one of her neighbors, tired of its bleating.

Consumed with unhappiness as a result, Beatriz begins the day by lighting a candle in front of a photo of the murdered animal.

While her healing skills help patients at a cancer center, *Beatriz at Dinner* focuses on her relationship with an enormously wealthy family living in a Newport Beach mansion overlooking the Pacific Ocean. This is the home of Kathy (Connie Britton) and Grant (David Warshofsky), who met Beatriz when she ministered to their sick daughter. After a massage session with Connie, Beatriz discovers that her aging, temperamental car won't start. This leads to an invitation to stay for dinner, which is really a business event with upscale guests who drink the likes of “Grey Goose with a splash of ‘cran.’ ”

An unappealing yuppie couple, Alex (Jay Duplass) and Shannon (Chloë Sevigny), is in attendance to celebrate, along with Kathy and Doug, a major business deal consummated with real estate mogul Doug (John Lithgow), accompanied by his trophy wife Jeana (Amy Landecker). Highlights of the pre-dinner conversation include Shannon's reference to France as “a Third-World country” and Doug's bandying about of possible titles for his new book, such as “You're in My Way, Asshole!” His banker son is approvingly described as pulling “pots of gold out of thin air.”

Beatriz comes to realize Doug is the hotel developer who destroyed her village back in Mexico, while he, first addressing her as one of the hired help, proceeds to praise her for being “legal” (“Good for you, You're working. You're contributing”).

But what finally sends Beatriz over the edge is the photo Doug passes around showing another kind of trophy—his big-game kill during an African safari. Her notion that all his pleasures are built upon the sufferings of others, however, does not guide her to any

healthy conclusions or actions.

The creators must have had certain amorously decent intentions with *Beatriz at Dinner*. And an encounter between an immigrant, with a broken-down automobile and generally humble living conditions, and a tycoon, devoted to clearing everything and everyone out of his path, has dramatic possibilities, if it were treated in a serious manner.

The problem is that the filmmakers here are so far removed from what is driving the immense social anger and alienation of the population, including the anger and alienation that played a role in bringing Donald Trump to power. Incidentally, Lithgow, as always, is subtle and entertaining even while offering a representation of someone who personifies great social evil.

Scriptwriter (and sometime comic actor) Mike White told *Parade* that one of his starting points for *Beatriz at Dinner* was outrage at the July 2015 killing of “Cecil the Lion” in Zimbabwe: “I’m an animal person. I’d heard about that story, and it just hit me in the gut. I had thought to myself: If I was at a dinner party with a guy like that, and he told me he was going to Africa and hunt a lion, what would I do? Would I flip out on him? Grab a butter knife and leap across the table?”

In fact, this reviewer would likely be as gloomy as Hayek’s character if the sentiments expressed in and viewpoint registered by *Beatriz at Dinner* constituted the only opposition to Trump and capitalism generally. Immigrants to the US from Mexico and elsewhere are not in favor of the brutalization of animals, but they have concerns greater than the unhappy fate of Cecil the Lion and the killing of a much-loved goat. They worry about jobs, housing, low wages, health care, education for their children, falling into the sinister clutches of ICE and more. However, Arteta’s might be the perfect film for soft-headed yoga teachers, Green city councilmen and -women and pious “anti-consumerists.”

Furthermore, at one point Beatriz fantasizes that by dispatching Doug she would eliminate the “source of all suffering” (“You killed my goat,” she metaphorically proclaims). No doubt the makers of *Beatriz at Dinner* are unaware of it, but they thereby make the indelible connection between a brand of dispirited, isolated, morbid, skeptical and frustrated middle class hostility toward the existing conditions

and individual terror.

Arteta is on record arguing that “*Beatriz At Dinner* is about the two opposing world views that have increasingly been colliding and unable to communicate. Our future is in jeopardy and finding out a way for us to truly negotiate the outcome of our convictions seems more important than ever. To me it comes down to an argument about what nature intended by allowing one of the species to become so extremely dominant.”

If one cannot communicate and negotiate with the upper crust of the dominant species, then what? In any event, forceful and determined resistance won’t come from holistic healers, urban goat herders and insipid Hollywood writers and directors.

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