

Reviews

CRITICS' WEEK

Filmmakers' First *Salvo* Hits, Then Misses

BOYD VAN HOEIJ
 @filmboyd

A Sicilian hit man sets out to kill a man and then claps eyes on his target's blind young sister in *Salvo*, the moody and extremely sensorial debut of scribe-helmets Fabio Grassadonia and Antonio Piazza. Palestinian actor Saleh Bakri (*The Band's Visit*) is aces as the supposedly steely Mafia assassin who can't quite bring himself to bump off the non-seeing witness, and camera-work and sound are fully immersive, so it's a shame the film falls into roughly two halves that never quite fit together. Nonetheless, a Cannes Critics' Week slot should guarantee decent fest exposure and some niche theatrical pickups for these helmets to watch.

An extended prologue introduces *Salvo* (Bakri, son of actor Mohammad Bakri) getting down to business, efficiently dispatching several rival killers that have cornered his car; he corners one of them and gets him to confess the name of the man who wants him dead — Renato — before shooting the guy in the head. The killing is efficiently shown in a bloodless, low-angle long shot, suggesting the action-packed early going isn't going to last; nor does it even seem to interest the filmmakers that much.

The pic's main attraction comes some 10 minutes in, with a prolonged, breathlessly executed scene, shot in one impressive take inside Renato's darkened house.

Salvo

Director:

Fabio Grassadonia, Antonio Piazza

Starring:

Saleh Bakri, Sara Serralocco



SARA SERRAIOCCO

Rena-
to isn't home, but his sister, the blind Rita (Sara Serraiocco), is, counting money and singing along to her favorite song in the basement when Salvo breaks in. Grassadonia and Piazza convey a wealth of details without using any dialogue, relying instead on some exceptionally choreographed Steadicam work from lenser Daniele Cipri, very suggestive low lighting courtesy of all the shuttered windows to keep out the Palermo heat, and a heightened soundscape that not only suggests Rita's superior hearing but also ratchets up the tension. Rita's transformation from happy-at-home girl to frightened almost-hostage is simply breathtaking, and when the inevitable shootout occurs, Salvo spares the girl, who would have otherwise been collateral damage.

How much can this blind onlooker witness? The answer is unclear, as *Salvo* suddenly cuts to Rita's p.o.v., and it emerges that she can see vague shapes and movements. Since auds haven't seen her perspective before, it's not clear if Rita has always had very limited sight, or if this occurs for the first time when she's with Salvo, as if their high-tension encounter produced some kind of miracle.

The film's second half sees Salvo take Rita to an abandoned factory where he keeps her captive. It's clear he's torn between his duty to get rid of witnesses and his fascination with her, though whether this is because she's a woman, or supposedly helpless, or both, is not immediately apparent. Something of the Lima syndrome certainly creeps into their limited interactions, and some scenes between Salvo and the cou-

ple from whom he rents his dingy room (played by Giuditta Perriera and Luigi Lo Cascio) do shed light on his personality while adding humor, as it's clear who's the stronger sex in this particular marriage.

Unfortunately, the two halves of the story don't seem to fit together naturally and there are too many questions left unanswered for the film to make complete sense. After taking a couple of left turns following its thriller-like opening, *Salvo* unfortunately returns to a more conventional register in the closing reels, though the atmospheric picture does continuously fascinate on a visceral level. The effortlessly intense Bakri reps another plus, ensuring auds will want to stick with him no matter what. Tech package is simply superb.

CREDITS A Lucky Red release of a Cristaldi Pictures, Acaba Produzioni production, in association with Mact, Cite Films, with the participation of Arte France Cinema. (International sales: Films Distribution, Paris.) Produced by Massimo Cristaldi, Fabrizio Mosca. Co-producers, Antoine Clermont-Tonnerre, Raphael Berdugo. Directed, written by Fabio Grassadonia, Antonio Piazza. Camera (color, widescreen, HD), Daniele Cipri; editor, Desideria Rayner; production designer, Marco Dentici; sound (Dolby SRD), Guillaume Sciamia. Reviewed at Le Nouveau Latina, Paris, May 3, 2013. (In Cannes Film Festival — Critics' Week.) Running time: 108 MIN. Saleh Bakri, Sara Serraiocco, Luigi Lo Cascio, Mario Pupella, Giuditta Perriera. (Sicilian, Italian dialogue).