

‘L’Immensità’ Review: Penélope Cruz Adds Dazzle to a Gentle, Poignant Tale of Transgender Adolescence

The Spanish icon's star power is both an asset and a distraction in Italian director Emanuele Crialese's first film in over a decade, occasionally pulling focus from arresting newcomer Luana Giuliani.

By Guy Lodge ▾



Courtesy of Angelo R. Turetta

“L’Immensità” is director [Emanuele Crialese](#)’s first feature film in 11 years, and only his fifth in a quarter-century: The gifted Italian, best known to international audiences for his splendid, richly felt Ellis Island immigrant saga “Golden Door,” has never been one for unconsidered or impersonal projects. At first glance, then, one might wonder what drew him out of hibernation for a film that, with its trim runtime and small-scale domestic narrative, belies a title that translates as “immensity.” This 1970s-set story of a 12-year-old navigating his gender identity

while his mother battles mental health demons is too palpably pained and heartfelt to be called slight, but it's sensitive and peculiar in ways that feel fragile — occasionally splintered and swamped by an elaborate setpiece, or the outsize star magnetism of arguably its secondary lead, one Penélope Cruz.

What gives the film ballast, in fact, falls under the category of outside knowledge: that for Crialese, it's a distorted memoir of sorts, filtering his own adolescent experience through the perspective of a child born biologically female, and yearning to be someone else. How indirect or abstract a proxy young Andrea (played by captivating, wild-eyed newcomer Luana Giuliani) is for the filmmaker's young self is for him to answer, but "*L'Immensità*" benefits from a disarmingly tender, sincere investment in the kid's plight. The film never treats transgender identity as a hot-button issue or message-movie dais, but as a particular, personal conviction in a life already beset with complications, and is more interested in how Andrea perceives and accepts his gender than in how the outside world resists it.

Still, at a time when the trans rights struggle is still prominent in headlines and political debate chambers, that delicacy nonetheless counts as topicality — an asset that, along with Cruz's irresistible presence, should net solid distributor interest for this unassuming film, both within and beyond the LGBTQ bracket. "*L'Immensità*" certainly leads with its star attraction, introduced in adoring, lushly-lit closeup, as her character Clara applies pearl earrings and resplendent layers of smokey-eye makeup to a face still pink and misted with tears. If it was through the lens of Pedro Almodóvar that Cruz really established herself as her generation's stand-in for Sophia Loren, Crialese takes the likeness one step further, planting the Spaniard in Loren's hometown of Rome, as the kind of beautifully wounded housewife that the Italian icon perfected in the films of Crialese's youth.

"You only wear makeup if you're going out or you've been crying," snipes Andrea — the name he calls himself as insistently as his family sticks with his female birth name of Adriana, to his constant consternation. More than his two younger siblings, he sees the psychological, physical and sometimes sexual abuse that Clara endures at the hand of his loveless father Felice (Vincenzo Amato); Andrea sometimes gets his share of it too. The family has recently moved to a spacious apartment on the city fringes, but the marriage is still a dead, airless burden on both spouses. Clara begs Felice to leave her, but Catholic decorum keeps them trapped together, until it dictates otherwise.

Over the course of a long, lazy summer, Andrea seeks what escape he can through the undeveloped expanse of reeds opposite the apartment building. On the other side lies a campsite for socially maligned travelers, where he befriends a young girl, Sara (Penelope Nieto Conti) who accepts him for who he is — the only person in his life to do so. Clara forbids these playdates, clearly fearful of the consequences should Andrea's secret emerge to hostile strangers. She humors Andrea's assumed identity more than most, but still hasn't the insight or

understanding to treat it as more than a phase or an aberration, a figment of a child's fervid imagination that she defends as other relatives tut.

Despite that impasse, Andrea and Clara are allies in an extended family that regards them both as outsiders — the latter due to her Spanish origins and spiraling, reckless behavior that portends an imminent nervous breakdown. Crialese underlines this bond by literally spotlighting them in the film's sporadic fantasy musical sequences, fever-dreamed from the variety shows the family watches together on their black-and-white television. Snappily choreographed and shot in glistening monochrome, they position Andrea as the dashing male duet partner — sometimes in rockabilly leather, sometimes in suave black tie — to Clara's siren-like chanteuse, miming to Italian pop standards including a tremulous translation of Francis Lai's "Love Story" theme.

Notwithstanding the complex Freudian undertow of these gaudy diversions, they're less resonant and revealing than the more mundane centerpiece scenes in this episodic film: At family gatherings, coastal vacations, church communions and Christmas dinners, individual crises are brought to the fore in crowd conflicts. Andrea never seems more alone than when surrounded on all sides by kin: "I come from another galaxy," he begins to claim, and "L'Immensità" just about takes him at his word. Certainly Giuliani, in a fierce performance attentive both to the character's strident self-awareness and squirming physical discomfort with his body and everything around it, has an otherworldly quality that squares up to Cruz's radiance in their shared scenes, even if the film itself occasionally seems disproportionately besotted with the latter. "Can you stop being so beautiful?" an exasperated Andrea pleads with his mother at one point: The unspoken answer is a resounding no.

Yet perhaps even the film's fawning star worship feels personal in a film often beholden to the kitsch, glamorous diversions available to frustrated souls in 1970s Italy. Visually, the film has the brightened, heightened quality of selective memory, threaded through the buttery lighting of DP Gergely Pohárnok's busily populated but exactingly staged compositions and the iridescent, fresh-off-the-rack gorgeousness of Massimo Cantini Parrini's costumes. Everything in "L'Immensità" is beautiful even when everything wasn't: Crialese's odd, affecting memory piece layers the world as it was, is and could be in the same gilded frame.