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Naked Tango

Leonard Schrader, USA 1990, 92 minutes

The year is 1924 and Stephanie (Mathilda May) is sailing to Buenos Aires with her possessive, ageing husband. Whilst on the ship a girl goes overboard and Stephanie impulsively decides to exchange identities and lives with the girl. She ends up in a world of prostitution, slavery, sexual abuse and violence dominated by her husband Zico (Esai Morales) for as she finds out the dead girl committed suicide for she was betrothed to Zico against her will.

While this sounds the stuff of nightmares and very, very bad dreams, Leonard Schrader's directorial debut is in fact one of the most indulgent and overtly gorgeous films yet seen on the big screen. The traditional path of the captive coming to adore her captor raises its ugly head but stifling this is the sheer beauty of the set, design and costumes and breathtaking ambition of Schrader's vision.

In Naked Tango the plot mostly consists of what will happen to our heroes and heroines. In the underworld of Buenos Aires everyone is constantly in danger and Stephanie is in more than most. The film takes its title from the machismo associated with the Tango. Many of the villains end up dancing as insults and challenges to their rivals and all said the film itself can be considered equally in the light of a ballet rather than a piece of celluloid. The film's only statement is that of beauty. The whole of the film is taken up with who loves who? What is the way to win a persons heart? The beauty of danger and the beauty of battle. Schrader has taken on a massive gamble for his debut and it has worked. In Naked Tango he has created one of the most awesome pieces of cinematic work seen for decades. Beautiful, gorgeous and thoroughly dangerous Naked Tango ranks as one of the best films you will ever see.

*Review by Andrew Hesketh
Taken from EUFS Programme 1997-98*

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