

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2022/23 SEASON



SMALL BODY
(Language: Italian)

Director: Laura Samani, 2022. Running time: 89 minutes.
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 25th January, 2023.

“Laura Samani’s debut feature is a movie folktale: hard, weathered and knotted, like a piece of driftwood. In north-east Italy at the beginning of the 20th century, a young woman called Agata (Celeste Cescutti) is in shock after the stillborn death of her first child. Her priest tells her that the child is now doomed to wander Limbo in eternity because the baby died before being baptised.

Agata is shown undergoing a folk redemption or healing ceremony on the beach, but for her it is clearly more like her own kind of desolate emotional funeral; yet Agata hears that there is a church somewhere to the north whose priest has the supernatural power to bring a dead child back to life for a single breath, enough for a baptism and to elevate its immortal soul. So Agata digs the baby up under cover of darkness and heads off with the tiny casket tied grimly on her back, like a pilgrim; she is befriended in the forest by the semi-feral Lynx (Ondina Quadri) who is to be her only friend on their desperately gruelling and dangerous journey.

There are some amazing scenes and locations in this film, which has the air of a magical parable, like something by Alice Rohrwacher; I thought there might even be a tiny touch of Lars von Trier’s *Breaking the Waves*. The ending is, arguably, broadly guessable and some have expressed their dissatisfaction with the way that it is presented. I myself found my own objections were more about the hallucination-visionary scenes underwater which have become a bit of a movie cliché. Yet Samani’s film-making language has consistency and urgency, and there is an interesting streak of atheism that goes alongside this movie’s spiritual aura.”

Peter Bradshaw, *the Guardian*, 5th April, 2022.

“The first two scenes of Laura Samani’s *Piccolo corpo* (*Small Body*) could not be more different in feeling. The opener centres on Agata, who is pregnant, and the other residents from her small village in 1900s Italy, as they conduct a mesmerising ceremony blessing her soon-to-be-born child. In fact, the first shot of Agata is not of her face, which is covered with a white sheet, but of her bump, highlighting the importance of this small body to the film’s narrative. Samani then shifts the *Small Body*’s mood drastically but very competently, with the second scene focussing on the stillbirth of Agata’s baby. The joy of the first scene played out against the crushing depression of the second is hard-hitting but never jarring. As a stillborn, the baby’s soul will now, as the villagers believe, exist amidst eternal damnation in limbo. And there the narrative of *Small Body* is established, as we follow Agata on her determined journey to save her daughter’s soul, a passage observed through intimate close-ups, wide shots and impactful intimacy.

Samani, Marco Borromei and Elisa Dondi’s screenplay for *Small Body* is sparse and sometimes ineffective at the most important moments, but it works well in creating the enormous emotional void that only the loss of a baby can create. The story they write for Agata might seem simple, but the trio impressively add an emotional resonance to it as they observe the mother making the trek to a mystical, mysterious sanctuary that may or may not be real. Along the way, she meets with another young woman named Lynx, notable for her short hair and striking blue eyes. In her feature film debut, Celeste Cescutti is a revelation as the lead, working with little dialogue and exuding the majority of Agata’s pain through her eyes and facial movements, or emphasising Agata’s focus on her child by frequently and tightly hugging the coffin in which it lays. As Lynx – a complex figure who moves from enemy to companion of Agata – Ondina Quadri (*The Nest*) is equally impressive, drawing a character whose decisions are questionable but who undoubtedly has her own personal demons.

As a drama that highlights the pain of stillbirth, as well as societal and religious misgivings about it, *Small Body* is a real achievement. Agata’s husband struggles to relate to the pain – he tells her they can easily have another baby – and the priest of the village notes how the baby can neither be named nor baptised. There is little understanding for Agata’s emotional agony from anyone, a notion that can be paralleled to societies in 2022. Mitja Licen’s (*Deadlock*) wonderful cinematography further enforces both the restrictive force around Agata’s situation and her complete isolation, utilising claustrophobic close-ups as well as wide shots that place her in the immense and overpowering natural world of 1900s Italy. *Small Body*’s authentic worldbuilding extends further with Loredana Buscemi’s (*Happy as Lazzaro*) costume design, whilst the stifling melancholy of the tale is evocatively enhanced by Frederika Stahl’s (*Tomorrow*) choral-backed original score.

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Despite its tangible atmosphere, *Small Body* isn't always a fully absorbing watch: even with its slim runtime of 89 minutes, the pacing can be too glacial, whilst some scenes feel unnecessary and add little to the story. The characters – most notably Lynx – can feel underdeveloped, with subtle hints at a meaningful backstory causing only a frustrating intrigue. Where *Small Body* works best is in its observation of Agata, who is just a mother with an unbreakable and almost incommunicable bond with her daughter. When *Small Body* operates on this highly emotional stratosphere, such as in its haunting finale, it sings. On the surface, it is a film of simplicity in terms of its structure and style, but on a deeper level, *Small Body* works with a blinding, unbearable poignancy.”

William Stottor, *Loud and Clear*, April 23rd, 2022.