

Maktub: holding on and letting go

It may be regarded as a tear jerker, and in fact it is, but a good one indeed

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FILM REVIEW

Manolo (Diego Peretti) is an upper middle-class bank exec with a beautiful wife and two loveable kids. But he and his wife Beatriz (Aitana Sánchez-Gijón) are going through a marital crisis. It's not your typical seven or twelve-year itch, but rather the loss of perspective taking a toll on their stance on life and their capacity to appreciate all the good things they've been blessed with.



In steps the bold 15-year-old Antonio (Andoni Hernández), a boy from the Canary Islands who's moved to Madrid with his mother Mariluz (Goya Toledo) for the child's cancer treatment. Starting in comedic tone, Manolo goes in for a CT scan after a ridiculous accident at a wedding party. The comedic tone goes on unabated, apparently. But reality starts to sink in when Manolo makes the acquaintance of Antonio, who has few chances of recovering from bone marrow cancer and yet manages to take it all in stride, having learnt to assimilate the truth.

Before proceeding to write a review of a film like *Maktub* / *Cambio de planes* (Spain, 2011) one ought to bear in mind that sometimes it becomes quite difficult to take good intentions and end product into consideration. The Arabic word "Maktub," self-help guru tells us in *The Alchemist*, means something like "it was fate," that is, it was bound to happen. Like saying that chance encounters and situations are anything but, that it was destiny. But it is not to be taken literally, because the power or the possibility to change the focus is in your hands.

It may sound simplistic and unrealistic, like the advice from a self-help book, like the words of encouragement you need to hear when you're down on your luck and have nothing left to lose. Like saying, "Don't give up."

It's a positive message.

It may be turned into a tear jerker of a book or a movie.

But it may still be a good, efficient product.

Maktub's storyline may be condensed as an ordinary man's realization that life, in spite of its downturns, may indeed be viewed under a different lens, that

sometimes you let problems take over you. It takes the wisdom of a child dying from bone marrow cancer to help this man and a whole lot of people learn what really matters.

Yep, it's a tear jerker alright, but there are no blows below the belt in *Maktub*, at least not the blatant type of cheap shot you'd expect from a movie about a child who's dying, who knows there is little hope for him, but at some point understands that salvation, in the spiritual sense, is indeed possible, and that it may be attained by helping others out of their misguided navel gazing. Sitting in the darkness of a movie theatre, you may let tears roll down your cheeks and wipe them off with a Kleenex. And when the lights come up, you may always rush for the exit, lest someone see you engulfed by the lacerating pain and sweetness of a *dramédie* that lays all the cards on the table before moving on to the storytelling process itself.

Argentine performer Diego Peretti, the husband/father in distress, has all the makings of a fine comedian and drama actor, and his unconventional good looks makes *Maktub* more believable. In contrast, his wife Beatriz (Aitana Sánchez Gijón) is as breathtakingly beautiful in her mature years as she was in her 20s or early 30s.

The marital woes and existential crisis have pushed Manolo to neglect wife and kids. Wife takes on a handsome lover who, in a reversal of traditional roles, is eagerly waiting for Beatriz to make the life-changing decision of breaking up with her husband. It's a hard, selfish choice, from *Maktub's* standpoint. This is when the predictable plotline starts to develop.

It's "*Maktub*" when Manolo makes the acquaintance of the vivacious, cancer-stricken Antonio at a hospital ward. It's "*Maktub*" when Antonio's mother, who waits tables at a Mexican restaurant to pay for her son's medical bills, chances upon a lady customer who must make a choice between

husband/children/household and what she believes to be passionate love.

But her kids — a sensitive boy and an adorable little girl — foresee an imminent breakup and the disruption of the frail emotional balance they hold on tight to.

Everyone's in need of a "*Maktub*."

Their "*Maktub*" is Antonio, the boy suffering from a terminal disease. Antonio is like an angel passing through their lives, leaving an indelible imprint on them all. One of *Maktub's* main assets, the movie, is director Paco Arango's casting call. While Sánchez-Gijón could well rely on her stunning beauty alone, she plays the discontented wife with aplomb. The Diego Peretti character, disengaged at first, pulls *Maktub* ahead with the aid of the remarkably malleable young actor Andoni Hernández José, an admirable turn as the terminally ill child who becomes something of a sage.

While few surprises can be expected from a story like *Maktub's*, director Arango puts predictability to good use, and thus the film develops with the might of a parable, with the sweetly aching charm of a life lesson.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Maktub / Cambio de planes. Spain, 2011. Written and directed by: Paco Arango. With: Diego Peretti, Aitana Sánchez-Gijón, Goya Toledo, Andoni Hernández, Rosa María Sardá, Amparo Baró. Distributed by: Warner. NC13. Running time: 115 minutes.

