

THE Rite

Writer/Director Alice Rohrwacher talks *Corpo Celeste*

WORDS BY RACHAEL SCOTT

Corpo Celeste is an observational, coming of age tale revolving around thirteen-year-old Marta as she prepares for her Catholic confirmation, but it's clear she doesn't understand what it means to be confirmed. Feeling isolated, disconnected from her new home in rubbish-strewn Reggio Calabria in Southern Italy, and the faith her parents prescribed when she was baptised, Marta begins to rebel.

Tuscan born director Alice Rohrwacher is the younger sister of actress Alba, who played Tilda Swinton's daughter in *I Am Love*. Her directing style has been likened to Ken Loach, Lynne Ramsey and the Dardenne Brothers, and up until now she's focused on documentaries, but her fiction debut has an undeniably working class naturalism. STUDIO sat down with the softly spoken filmmaker to chat about her film.

STUDIO: How did the idea for the story come about?

Alice Rohrwacher: The idea grew from my desire to talk about a community of people from Reggio Calabria, which is where I used to live. I wanted to start with the characters who I had already found and liked. One was the priest, and the other was the teacher of the children who have the confirmation. I grew affectionate towards these two characters. They somehow embodied the community. Having found them, I had to find a witness, someone who would have my own view of things. So, I constructed Marta. It's not autobiographical, but she is my eyes – she represents me.

STUDIO: Do you think thirteen is too young to be able to decide whether or not you want to embrace God for the rest of your life?

AR: I can't really tell, but often the children who go through confirmation take it lightly. It's not very serious. However, if you look at the very words the children have to say when they are confirmed, they definitely mean a choice for the rest of your life. I wanted to tell a story about this very moment, when you are at an age where you have to make a choice.

STUDIO: Through Marta, you seem to be questioning what faith means in modern society. Do you think the Church has become confused as to what its role is?

AR: Yes, especially in Italy where the Church has great power and influence on people. The Church is confused. It tries to attract people as best as it can because churches are empty, but wanting to be attractive becomes something that is false and a pretense of modernity. Instead of putting forward questions, it provides answers. And instead of denouncing the very serious matters that are happening today, for example the power of commercial TV, it uses it to attract people.

STUDIO: The priest in the film appears more concerned about furthering his career than his faith. Is he typical of the

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priests that you know?

AR: There are different types of priests, but definitely the type of priest who is portrayed in the film is exemplary – there are many like him. The priests from the suburban part of the city aren't heroes. Very often they treat their service as a job. The Church is their office. They are often very isolated and lonely, so they grasp for power in order to break free from the isolation.

STUDIO: Who or what is the celestial body of the title?

AR: 'Corpo celeste' has several meanings in Italian. As it is not translatable, we decided that we would leave it in Italian. You can see the juxtaposition between 'celeste' – as in 'heavenly/from the sky' – and 'corpo', which means 'body', and this is Marta.

STUDIO: Where did you find Yle Vianello, the actress who played Marta?

AR: We searched for a long time, and finally found a young actress who lived in the mountains. Yle is originally from a community of people who are anarchists and self-sufficient, and in this way they are a bit separate from mainstream society.

STUDIO: Can you talk more about why you chose to set the film in Reggio Calabria?

AR: I chose this city because it's a place that I know well. I believe that as a place, it embodies the tragic places that are happening within Italy, especially in the South.

STUDIO: How did you and cinematographer H el ene Louvart come up with the visual style of the film?

AR: We decided to use a handheld camera in order to be more detailed. We wanted to be inside the scene, as well. It was because we wanted to be more realistic and use realism as a protagonist. There's a lot of work done with light and shadow in a very subtle way. For example, the film begins at night and ends at dawn, so it's as if the film lasts a day. There are many dark places and the priest often appears in darkness, so we wanted to narrate with light. This was something that was very important to us.

STUDIO: How do you see yourself evolving as a director in the next decade or so? Are there certain themes that interest you?

AR: A lot. I want to use cinema as the instrument that allows me to show the changes that are surrounding us. **S**

Corpo Celeste opens in cinemas March 30th.