

'Black Souls' a top-notch Italian gangster film

A bleak tragedy orchestrated in a Mafia key, "Black Souls" ("Anime Nere" in Italian) is broodingly effective as a crime drama because it's driven by family dynamics as much as the mechanics of transgression.

Directed and co-written by Francesco Munzi, "Black Souls" is set not in the Sicily of the "Godfather" saga or even the Camorra-run areas surrounding Naples featured in 2008's excellent "Gomorrah."

Rather, as photographed with a cool, wide-screen beauty by Vladan Radovic, this Italian saga takes place in remote Calabria, in the tiny mountainous town of Africo, where yet another criminal syndicate, the 'Ndrangheta, exerts powerful control.

Before we get to Calabria, however, "Black Souls" opens in Amsterdam, where Luigi (Marco Leonardi), looking impeccably criminal in black turtleneck and matching leather jacket, has a get-acquainted meeting with his new Spanish partner in the smuggling and sale of cocaine.

These sections of the film establish "Black Soul's" involving, almost neo-documentary style, the determination to handle everything in a lucid, matter-of-fact manner.

The energetic Luigi is partners in the drug business with his quieter brother Rocco (Pepino Mazzotta). Both men now live in hyper-modern Milan (Rocco even has a wife and daughter), but circumstances will draw them back to their almost primeval ancestral home.

Those circumstances involve their dour third brother, Luciano (Fabrizio Ferracane), who, wanting nothing to do with the family's criminal business, has stayed in Africo and remained a goat farmer like his father.

However, Luciano's hot-headed, tempestuous 20-year-old son, Leo (Calabrian newcomer Giuseppe Furno), is far from content with a goat herder's life. He burns to join his uncles in Milan and live the high life of his dreams.

In a final act of adolescent bravado before he leaves, Leo shoots up a bar that just happens to belong to a rival criminal faction. Those folks, as it turns out, were responsible for the death of the brothers' father, Leo's grandfather. In towns like this, as William

Faulkner famously noted, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

The uncles Luigi and Rocco realize what nephew Leo does not, that his thoughtless act could have serious repercussions. Drawn back to Africo against their will, and their better judgment, the brothers go to work mending fences.

One of "Black Souls' " most involving aspects is its almost ethnographic interest in the rituals and customs of this land that time forgot. The respect paid to the brothers' ancient mother, the expensive gifts given to other relatives, the singing of local songs, all give us a sense of how the social order works in a world where the tiniest slight can be taken as a potentially fatal lack of respect.

The same goes for the elaborate, almost courtship-type, approach the brothers make to yet another criminal family, one that could hold the balance of power should the situation worsen.

The acting in "Black Souls" is strong across the board, and that the actors are not well-known in this country only heightens the film's strong sense of verisimilitude. Worthy of special note in this male-dominated film is Barbora Bobulova, who plays Rocco's wife, Valeria, an urban sophisticate who often feels left out because she doesn't speak the local dialect her husband and his siblings favor.

Once the stage is set and the more intense plot elements of "Black Souls" kick in, the film's emphasis on character and setting pays off, just as the muted nature of the storytelling adds to its considerable power. As in classic tragedy, the potent ending here is no less effective because the events leading up to it feel increasingly inescapable.

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'Black Souls'

MPAA rating: None

Running time: 1 hour, 43 minutes

Playing: Landmark Nuart, West Los Angeles.