

**Blancanieves.** *Written and directed by Pablo Berger. Performed by Sofia Oria, Macareena Garcia, Daniel Giminez Cacho, and Maribel Verdu. Cohen Media Group, 2013. Film.*

Events often occur in groups of threes in fairy tales. The same pattern seems to have occurred in contemporary fairy-tale films. The Grimm brothers' "Snow White" has been adapted in recent years into three feature-length films: Tarsem Singh's *Mirror Mirror* (2012), Rupert Sanders's *Snow White and the*

*Huntsman* (2012), and Pablo Berger's *Blancanieves* (2013). Although Berger's *Blancanieves* lacks the American star power of *Mirror Mirror*, which featured Julia Roberts and Nathan Lane, or the elaborate special effects of *Snow White and the Huntsman*, Berger's film is the most successful and experimental of the three films. As is often the case in fairy tales, the third time is the charm.

Shot in black and white, *Blancanieves* avoids the trend of lavish special effects or 3D technology found in many recent contemporary films. Like Michel Hazanavicius's popular 2011 French film *The Artist*, which earned the Oscar for Best Picture in 2012, Berger has chosen to frame his fairy tale as a modern silent film that focuses on strong acting and a clever but appropriate reimagining of a well-known fairy tale. *Blancanieves* is set in the austere landscape of 1920s Spain. Named after the title character of Georges Bizet's opera, Berger's film transforms "Snow White" into a moody melodrama. The striking cinematography of the Iberian Peninsula is supported by a haunting score by Alfonso de Vilallonga. The many music and dance scenes in *Blancanieves*—both flamenco and the stylized movements of the bullfight—emphasize the rhythms and sensuality of the film.

The protagonist, Carmen (played as a child by Sofia Oria and as a young woman by Macarena Garcia) is the daughter of a famous bullfighter and a flamenco dancer. Her father (Daniel Gimenez Cacho) is distracted while performing in the bullring and is deeply gored before a stadium of horrified onlookers. His accident causes the premature birth of his daughter and the death of his wife in childbirth. Encarna (Maribel Verdu) is an ambitious and greedy nurse who cares for the paralyzed matador and quickly becomes Carmen's new stepmother. Only interested in her husband's wealth, Encarna isolates the once famous bullfighter from his family. She imprisons him in his wheelchair and begins to mistreat her young stepdaughter. When Encarna kills her father and plots to eliminate Carmen, the young woman manages to escape and is taken in by a traveling troupe of dwarfs who stage bullfights. Although Carmen escapes death, she suffers amnesia and does not know who she is and so is renamed *Blancanieves*, or Snow White, by the dwarfs. Using the bullfighting skills taught to her by her father, *Blancanieves* becomes a successful female bullfighter. As a popular matador, she regains her memory and identity when she performs in the ring where her father met his defeat at the opening of the film. But a moment after her professional triumph and reclamation of her identity, her stepmother, in disguise, offers her the poisoned apple.

Berger has said that he was inspired to create his film after seeing photographs of bullfighting dwarfs that he found in Cristina Garcia Redero's photography collection *Espana Occulta/Hidden Spain* (1999); he has also acknowledged direct allusions to Tod Browning's creepy 1932 film, *Freaks*. Berger's adaptation of "Snow White" is a sometimes disturbing film that is intended for a more

mature audience of teens and adults rather than the child-friendly film adaptations, such as Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937). Just as he updates and makes this Snow White a far more active female protagonist who achieves recognition based on her skills rather than her beauty, the director also provides an ambiguous conclusion to the film that undercuts the concept of the happy ending. *Blancanieves* falls into a paralyzed state, and there is no handsome prince to wake her from her spell. Instead, she becomes a sideshow attraction in a traveling circus, where individuals pay to see if their kiss will wake this Sleeping Beauty. The kiss and concern of one of the dwarfs, who remains her constant guard during the imprisonment in the glass coffin, elicits a single tear. This tear hints that *Blancanieves*'s imprisonment might be coming to an end, just as her kiss revived her father from his paralyzed state.

Although *Blancanieves* was the Spanish submission for the category of best foreign film in 2013, it did not make the Academy Awards short list for the Oscar. This fairy-tale film has had limited release in the United States, but it is well worth seeking out. I think it is far more effective in its use of the features of the silent film than *The Artist*, which was more successful. It is also the most compelling and complex of three recent film adaptations of "Snow White." After a showing of the film at the Roger Ebert Film Festival, Berger explained, "I'm not a film director. I'm a storyteller. I tell stories. I tell fairy tales." Even though *Blancanieves* dramatically shifts the setting of "Snow White" from the dark forests of Germany to the windswept bullrings of Spain, the film is a haunting and mysterious version of the tale that is both satisfying and provocative. Like Jean Cocteau's *La Belle et la Bête* (1946), or Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), Berger's *Blancanieves* is a visually stunning fairy-tale film that retains the spirit of the original tale but manages to extend and add to it in provocative ways.

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