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# **ASTRONAUTS**

**(ASTRONAUTAS)**

**(SPAIN)**

An Alta Classics release of a Tesela, La Zanfona Prods. production, in association with Canal Plus, Canal Sur. (International sales: Kevin Williams Associates, Madrid.) Executive producer, Jose Antonio Felez.

Directed, written by Santi Amodeo. Camera (color, widescreen), Alex Catalan; editor, J. Manuel G. Moyano; music, Lavadora; art director, Javier Lopez; sound (Dolby SRD), Daniel de Zayas, Jorge Marin. Reviewed at Alta Films, Madrid, Jan. 28, 2004. Running time: 86 MIN.

With: Nacho Novo, Teresa Hurtado, Juan Motilla, Alex O'Dogherty, Jons Pappila, Enrico Vecchi, Manolo Solo, Julian Villagran.

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By JONATHAN HOLLAND

**A** compelling, compassionate drama centered on a recovering junkie, "Astronauts" is an unpolished gem whose freshness and originality far outweigh its occasional indulgences. Writer-director Santi Amodeo's first solo feature looks free and easy but is, in fact, highly controlled, and has "cult" written all over it. Home B.O. has been discreet since early March release, but exposure looks guaranteed on the fest circuit, where Amodeo's idiosyncrasies and rejection of the cinematic rule book will garner him attention.

Unshaven, wild-eyed fortysomething Daniel (Nacho Novo) goes cold turkey in a shepherd's hut before heading to the city to try and start a new life by renovating a tumbledown house. When he meets Laura (Teresa Hurtado), a 16-year-old Andalusian, the aggressively paranoid Daniel initially wants to have nothing to do with her. But he later softens and allows her to stay with him.

Slowly, it emerges Daniel is following a decalogue for recovery provid-

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ed by his shrink — a “Guide for the Exemplary Citizen,” with 10 items of advice. These include “a clean house,” “look after the little things,” “socialization” and “watching television.” They look easy, but for Daniel, a self-proclaimed “astronaut,” they represent a real challenge.

Daniel’s attempts to follow them, with Laura’s help, lead to much low-key comedy, lent extra weight by a fabulous central perf from the physically spiky, energetic Novo. He manages to convey the complexities and contradictions of a character who is violent but needy, misanthropic but secretly goodhearted — and desperately lonely. By the final reel, Daniel has become a genuinely moving figure.

Debutante Hurtado is just right as Laura, observing Daniel’s excesses and antics with wry bemusement as she slowly becomes a part of his life. The relationship between them deepens after Daniel decides to search for Laura’s brother, Andres (Julian Villagran).

Moments of sharp observation abound in the movie, such as Daniel’s trip to a record shop owned by Torta (Alex O’Dogherty) that leads to a typically quirky sequence about the geography of record buying. Other moments have a tragic undercurrent. Daniel, for example, can only eat yogurt and cakes after years as a junkie eating baby food, and a dinner party hosted by Lorenzo (Manolo Solo) ends in humiliation when, in an attempt to be normal, Daniel takes a sip of alcohol and throws up everywhere.

Dialogue is written and performed with a careful ear for authenticity. Lensing, in tune with the movie’s low-key, unsensationalist nature, is mostly handheld, in contrast to the intensely colored, Roy Lichtenstein-inspired title credits and inserts. Only Amodeo’s tendency to overuse jump shots starts to look like a stylistic nervous tic.