

Document Citation

Title	Asphalt
Author(s)	Jonathan Holland
Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	2000 Mar 06
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	37
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Asfalto (Asphalt), Calparsoro, Daniel, 1999

ASPHALT

(ASFALTO)

(SPAIN)

An Alta Films release of a Jose Maria Lara P.C. production, in association with Albares Prods., Sur Films, TVE, Canal Plus, ETB. (International sales: TFI Intl., Paris.) Produced by Jose Maria Lara.

Directed by Daniel Calparsoro. Screenplay, Calparsoro, Santiago Tabernero, Frank Palacios. Camera (color), Josep M. Civit; editor, Julia Juaniz; music, Mastreta, Najwajean; sound (Dolby Digital/DTS), Stephane Kah. Reviewed at Cine Principea, Madrid, Feb. 5, 2000. (In Berlin Film Festival — Panorama.) Running time: 94 MIN.

Lucia Najwa Nimri
Charly Juan Diego Botto
Chino Gustavo Salmeron
Antonio Alfredo Villa
Clarita Antonia San Juan
Luis Roger Ibanez

By JONATHAN HOLLAND

An earnest urban thriller centering on the uncharmed lives of three young Eurotrash, Daniel Calparsoro's fourth pic, "Asphalt," is his most commercial to date, but lacks the distinctiveness of his more socially charged and politically committed previous work

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("Leap Into the Void," "Blinded"). Helmer's desire to make a straightforward genre movie has forced him to stick too closely to the rule book, resulting in a B-movie feel that's at odds with the general technical stylishness.

The first of the Basque-born director's films to be set in Madrid, pic begins with a showy car crash before homing in on the story of the raccoon-eyed Lucia (Najwa Nimri, Calparsoro's real-life partner and star of all his films to date) and her muscular, twitchy b.f., Chino (Gustavo Salmeron). Their buddy, drug dealer Charly (Juan Diego Botto), looks on as Lucia and Chino have sex before all three go off to rob a French businessman at gunpoint.

Chino accidentally shoots the Frenchman and, believing he's killed him, escapes, whereupon the Frenchman revives. Script is full of little tricks like this but, after setting them up, fails to wring maximum dramatic impact. Lucia and Charly start getting it on, and Lucia locks into indecision about the two men that lasts pretty much through the rest of the film.

Chino's elder brother, policeman Antonio (Alfredo Villa), has looked after Chino since they were small and is still trying to get his perennially rebellious little bro to do the right thing. Chino achieves this by tipping the cops off about a planned drug deal between Charly and aging Mafioso Luis (Roger Ibanez). After time in jail, Charly is faced with a series of dilemmas, involving violence, theft, drugs and big money. His reunion with Chino — the latter punching and then hugging him — is one of pic's more powerful moments.

Plot constantly verges on something interesting but is too incident-laden and thin on characterization. Though the leads look more like models or actors than the roles they're playing, perfs are gutsy and physical, particularly from Salmeron, who successfully brings out the conformity/rebellion crisis inside Chino. Question marks hang over Nimri's ability to carry an entire pic: though she has terrific screen presence and an interesting, otherworldly air, her acting is too self-contained; in the past, generally playing psychologically damaged anti-heroines, this has not been a problem.

Pacing is uneven, over-lengthy silences mixing with tightly packed narrative, though the atmosphere around these frustrated and hunted lives is credibly presented. Action sequences are busy, and the oppressive heat of Madrid is well captured. Quirky jazzy soundtrack is pleasant, though not always appropriate.