

Document Citation

Title	At the end of the night
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Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	2003 Jun 23
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	25
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Alla fine della notte (At the end of the night), Piscicelli, Salvatore, 2003

AT THE END OF THE NIGHT

(ALLA FINE DELLA NOTTE)

(ITALY)

A Minerva Pictures release of a Centrale D'Essai production. (International sales: Gruppo Minerva Internazionale, Rome.) Produced by Enzo Gallo.

Directed, written, edited by Salvatore Piscicelli. Camera (color), Saverio Guarna; production designer, Rosselia Guarna; costume designer, Nicoletta Taranta; sound (Dolby), Fulgenzio Ceccon. **Reviewed at Taormina Film Festival (World Cinema), June 13, 2003. Running time: 90 MIN.**

With: Ennio Fantastichini, Elena Sofia Ricci, Ida Di Benedetto, Ricky Tognazzi, Stefania Orsola Garelo, Anna Ammirati, Roberto Herlitzka.

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By JAY WEISSBERG

After a brief flirtation with DV and Dogma, helmer Salvatore Piscicelli is on a more fluid track with his exploration of an actor's midlife crisis in "At the End of the Night." Plot uses the well-worn formula of a physical journey as a portal to inner discovery, but things stay fresh thanks to first-rate script and spot-on casting. With its well told story and satisfyingly ambiguous ending, pic should nestle nicely into fest slots as well as Italophile screens at home.

Bruno Spada (Ennio Fantastichini) is a successful actor and director whose depression makes him question his choices, past and present. He revisits the people who made him happy, but finds he has to dig deeper to understand his behavior. First stop is Tuscany and ex-g.f. Viola (Elena Sofia Ricci), who a decade earlier put the kibosh on their relationship and settled down with nice, stable Filippo (Ricky Tognazzi). Now she's being cheated on, and Bruno's return leads her to probe her own past.

Back in Rome, Bruno's wife Fiamma (Stefania Orsola Garelo) suggests they speed up their separation; she loves him but recognizes the marriage has been a disaster, not least thanks to his incapacity for fidelity. Always running away from emotional skirmishes, Bruno leaves for Naples and the aunt (Piscicelli regular Ida Di Benedetto) who took care of him when he was young. More inner ghosts are examined as he explores his childhood stomping grounds.

Auds familiar with Piscicelli's previous efforts ("Immacolata and Concetta," "Body of the Soul," "Quartet") will be surprised at how little flesh is exposed, but the psychological acuity he's demonstrated before doesn't fail him here. The superb cast members embody their characters to perfection, with Garelo a marvel in an extended confrontation with her faithless husband. Scene is given space to breathe, and she conveys love, exhaustion and pain without melodrama.

Opening shots are a technical standout, with graceful camerawork that elegantly describes space as it glides inquisitively through Bruno's therapist's room. Lensing throughout is accomplished, but the grace of those few minutes sticks in the memory.