

Jacques Audiard's *Emilia Pérez*: A mishmash of a musical

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Emilia Pérez is a 2024 Spanish-language musical set amid Mexico's drug wars, written and directed by French filmmaker Jacques Audiard. It has received considerable media attention, praised by well-known industry directors, and touted as a serious contender at the upcoming Academy Awards. At the recent Golden Globe awards, it became the second-most-nominated film in the event's history. (More than anything else, however, this points toward the current cinema vacuum.)

While the film's technical sophistication and somewhat novel approach—an operetta fused with nominally realistic social elements—occasionally come together in emotionally striking ways, the meandering and implausible story has little substance to offer.

The drama begins with Rita Mora Castro (Zoe Saldaña), an overworked lawyer in Mexico City. Following the trial of an accused murderer, on whose behalf her legal team is dishonestly working, she receives a mysterious phone call asking her if she'd like to get rich.

Moments later, Rita is kidnapped and driven to the outskirts of town where she meets the grisly Manitas de Monte (Karla Sofía)—the wealthy ringleader of a notorious and politically connected drug cartel. His wish is to escape the murderous gang warfare and begin a new life as a woman—with no expense spared in the process. Rita agrees to provide logistical support in return for a handsome payout.

For Manitas' plan to be kept secret, “everything must disappear.” He sends Rita to Thailand and Israel in search of a safe place outside of Mexico for him to “reset,” and ships his unwitting wife, Jesse (Selena Gomez), and two children to a snowy cottage in Switzerland. After staging his own death, Manitas heads to Tel Aviv to see Dr. Wasserman (Mark Ivanir),

who has agreed to perform the surgeries necessary for his gender transition.

Four years on, Rita has relocated with her financial windfall to the UK, where she hobnobs with the London jet set. While out for dinner with friends, she recognizes the transformed Manitas—who introduces herself as Emilia Pérez. Rita suspects that Emilia has followed her to London with violent intentions, to erase the “last witness” to her past life. But Emilia has come with a nobler aim—to be reunited with her children (albeit on her own terms).

Rita arranges for Jesse and the children to live with Emilia, who they are told is Manitas' “distant cousin” (and heir to his fortune), in her luxury house overlooking Mexico City. As Emilia attempts to atone for her past crimes through charity work, Jesse feels increasingly captive, in what she perceives as yet a different form of Manitas' “golden cuffs.” When Jesse announces that she and boyfriend, Gustavo (Édgar Ramírez), plan on marrying and relocating to another city with the kids, Emilia lashes out, setting into motion a series of violent and tragic consequences.

Though the production is significantly stylized, there is something initially fresh in the depictions of daily street life in comparison to the imagery of conspicuous wealth and glamour one sees in so many films. The opening scenes of *Emilia Pérez*, which offer glimpses into some of the cynicism and corruption widespread in the Mexican legal system, make for a promising start.

Some of the initial musical numbers too have an appeal. The erratic and snappy choreography, spoken-word-style song and sensitive a cappella melodies set against the chaotic urban backdrop do perhaps offer a little of what Adriana Paz (Emilia's love interest, Epifanía) describes as “the sensation of living in Mexico.”

However, a few moments of intrigue and a degree of technical panache do not compensate for what is, in the end, a meandering and oftentimes illogical patchwork of a story that skips from one implausible plot line to another. Overall, the outlandish premise and campy musical acts serve as a substitute for and diversion from a more penetrating look at social reality.

Take the following example. As part of Emilia's newly founded charity intended to help the families of the cartel's many victims, Rita pays a visit to some imprisoned *sicarios*, who describe to her the horrific details of those they have "disappeared." This is one of the film's more striking scenes.

Shortly afterward, however, Emilia and Rita host a lavish dinner party intended to entice a stylish crowd of "drug kingpins, corrupt officials and crooks" into funding their charity. Rita performs a musical number with the chorus, "Talk, talk all these people talk, but now they are going to pay, pay, pay"—as though slightly hurting the pocket books of these rich criminals is some kind of retribution for their victims!

Following the release of *Emilia Pérez*, numerous comments popped up referring to its inaccurate depictions of Mexico and to its muddled dialogue and lyrics. Whatever the nationalist-patriotic limitations of such criticisms, they do point toward the film's generally light-minded attitude to its subject matter. In a recent interview, the film's director and screenwriter, Jacques Audiard, who lives in France, acknowledged that, "I didn't study [Mexico] much. ... What I needed to know I already knew a little bit."

In another interview, Audiard, who does not speak fluent Spanish, observed that, "Not knowing the language gives me a quality of detachment. When I've directed in my own language, I get stuck on the details." Such an approach suggests a preference for generalities and surface polish over concrete substance, and avoids the challenges involved in genuinely clarifying social and psychological matters. This may help to account for the many vague and even incoherent lines of dialogue.

The premise for *Emilia Pérez* was loosely extracted from a chapter in Boris Razon's 2018 novel, *Écoute*. In response to the question as to why he found the kingpin character intriguing, Audiard explained in a *New York Times* interview that he was struck by "this person, representative of pure violence, of machismo, of the

most absolute patriarchy, having a desire for femininity. It was that paradox that drew me." He then adds, "What interested me also is the endemic violence that Mexico deals with and the tremendous amount of people who have disappeared."

However, what exactly *is* the relationship between "absolute patriarchy" and "endemic violence in Mexico"? *Emilia Pérez* would have us believe that the former drives the latter, with the psychology of gender at the heart of the issue. However, the "paradox of absolute patriarchy" found in gang life is, above all, a social problem—one symptom of desperate poverty, brutal exploitation and historical class oppression.

Had these objective contradictions been probed more deeply, the central protagonist, Emilia, might have been placed on a more authentic footing. Her characterization, which often lapses into outlandish caricature, might have taken a bolder, more sincere direction.

About Audiard's film, *The Prophet* (2009), the WSWS wrote that, "In general, the film has enough grittiness and notable performances to create the appearance of reality—but one that cannot be scrutinized too closely." Minus the grittiness, this assessment could provide a more generous summing up of the problems present in *Emilia Pérez*.



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