

‘Baby’ Review: Coming of Age in São Paulo



Baby is a slow-moving, beautifully composed portrayal of queer life in the heart of São Paulo.

Baby, directed by Marcelo Caetano, centres on Wellington (João Pedro Mariano), an 18-year-old who has been released from a juvenile detention centre. His parents have left São Paulo with no forwarding address. Leaving him with no place to call home. From there, he meets Ronaldo (Ricardo Teodoro), a sex worker who takes him on as an apprentice, blurring the lines between lovers and colleagues. As the narrative unfurls, a beautiful yet tumultuous relationship emerges.

The most striking character within this film is the city of São Paulo. Immediately, you’re embedded in the vibrant and bustling realities of metropolitan life. Older, faded buildings are sandwiched between modern, towering apartment complexes. Everything is raw and authentic—the peeling paint from buildings, streets cluttered with people going about their daily lives. The cinematography captures the city with an aura of transparency. Interestingly, the audience is held at a distance from the characters in this public space. Zoomed-out shots make us, as the audience, mere bystanders to Wellington’s and Ronaldo’s relationship, observing from afar and never allowing us to get too close.

Yet in the private sphere, things are different. When Ronaldo shelters Wellington in his cramped apartment, we are let into the secret of what makes their relationship so evocative: their acceptance of one another, Wellington’s softness and Ronaldo’s rough edges flowing into one another. The two actors effectively negotiate the contradictions that exist within these characters. Ricardo Teodoro fleshes out Ronaldo’s loving but domineering nature; one gets the sense that, though he deeply cares for Wellington, he is also exploiting him for his own gain as he ages out of the sex trade. Pedro Mariano plays Wellington with sensitivity, sweetness, and naivety, a kind and free-flowing spirit despite the hardships forced upon him.

The film doesn’t shy away from its politics; the production design highlights the ever-widening wealth gap that exists within the city. At certain points, we see the apartments of the uber-wealthy Brazilians. Here, the sound design changes. In Ronaldo’s one-bedroom flat, the noise of train tracks, traffic, and the outside world permeates his space. But for wealthy characters, noise is a choice, a pollution that they can choose to shut out completely.

The editing in this film, at times, weakens its meaning. Where the story is supposed to hit its emotional peaks, the editing lags, short-changing those breakthroughs. The music score also isn't used to full capacity to further demonstrate pivotal moments within the storytelling, which feels like a missed opportunity.

It would also be interesting to see Wellington's life outside of Ronaldo's world. Though we are given glimpses of the São Paulo voguing community, it's easy to feel robbed that more of this community isn't included within the film. Similarly, we learn little about his friendships outside of the central relationship. What Caetano captures most interestingly here is the lives of homeless queer youth in São Paulo. We see systems at work that punish queerness rather than protect these vulnerable characters. Wellington is left to fend for himself and has few options because of the cards he has been dealt. Within its run time, the film paints a picture that life is a delicate balance between dancing and fighting for survival.

Verdict

Baby is a meditative piece on the realities of queer youth, sex, and found family in São Paulo. *Baby* is a different kind of coming-of-age story that doesn't shy away from both the grit and the beauty.