

# The New York Times

## All the Life Surrounding Death in the Afternoon



David Fandila in action in “Matador,” about Mr. Fandila’s quest to reach 100 fights in a season.

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When David Fandila was a little boy growing up in Granada, Spain, he would pretend his mother’s dish towels were capes to flap before imaginary bulls. By the time he was a young man the homely props had been exchanged for squares of crimson and magenta: the parakeet hues of the professional bullfighter. For his mother, however, the memory of those childish games may not be entirely fond.

Yet Mrs. Fandila’s furrowed anxiety is as vital to the success of “The Matador” as her son’s surging ambition. Her ambivalence is a counterweight to this documentary’s musky aura of male bravado, a lonely argument against the willful courting of danger and death. She reminds us that beneath the pageantry and, yes, artistry lies a performance that many people view as little more than ritualized slaughter.

And we do need reminding, because it’s very easy to be seduced by “The Matador” (and to suffer the morning-after contrition). Barbaric, elegant, primitive, erotic, revolting, thrilling: the movie, like bullfighting itself, is all of these.

Thrust forward by John Califra’s uncommonly stirring score, the story of Mr. Fandila’s quest to reach 100 fights in a single season — a goal only 12 matadors have so far achieved — unspools with more drama than most blockbusters. Blessed with a charismatic leading man, an arcane setting (bullfighting has roots in Roman sacrificial religion), and a narrative steeped in blood and hand-to-hoof combat — not to mention a triumphant six-bull climax — the film is a Hemingway fantasy.

None know this better than the filmmakers, Stephen Higgins and Nina Gilden Seavey, who cleverly ride the action with barely a nod to objectivity. Though bullfighting’s opponents are given glancing attention,

“The Matador” doesn’t pretend to be a dissection of the tradition or a moral assessment of its practitioners. Accompanying their subject from press conference to bullring, from Spain to Peru, the filmmakers paint instead an unapologetic portrait of a life filled with complexity and contradiction: of a shy, socially isolated young man who nevertheless excels at exhibitionism.

“This sacrifice had better be worth it,” Mr. Fandila mutters at one point, though the sentiment could as easily have been delivered by his older brother, Juan Alvaro, a former professional skier turned faithful acolyte. Some of the film’s best scenes follow the brothers’ silent preparations for the ring, the religious overtones of the dressing ritual impossible to overlook. (David, who rarely sees his girlfriend, might as well have taken a vow of celibacy.) Shots of rhinestone-encrusted boleros standing stiffly on chairs remind us not only of armature but also of the oppressive weight of family expectations.

But it’s the weight of the bulls (often 1,300 pounds or more) that dominates the film’s breathtaking, superbly edited fight sequences. Frantically pivoting mere inches from heaving muscle, laying a hand between monstrous horns — like a man halting an express train by sheer will — Mr. Fandila is a magnificent lunatic. Yet as he rears back, spine curved like a bow and arms raised to plunge the banderillas, the line between man and bull, reason and instinct, is obliterated. Stripping away centuries of civilization, “The Matador” confronts something primal in human nature, daring us to do the same.

### *THE MATADOR*

*Opens on Friday in New York.*

Directed by Stephen Higgins and Nina Gilden Seavey; directors of photography, Christopher Jenkins and James Morton-Haworth; edited by Ian Rummer; music by John Califra; produced by Mr. Higgins and Ms. Seavey; released by City Lights Pictures. Running time: 1 hour 14 minutes. This film is not rated.