

# Film Review: 'Roma' delivers soul, spirit — and a dash of Mexican magic



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- The film is set in a prosperous household in Mexico City’s Roma neighborhood in the early 1970s

CHENNAI: Tipped as a strong Oscar contender, Alfonso Cuarón’s magnificent black-and-white magnum opus, “Roma,” weaves a magical family tale with endearing simplicity and sensitivity.

The film is set in a prosperous household in Mexico City’s Roma neighborhood in the early 1970s. But its soul and spirit come from the maid, Cleo (Yalitza Aparicio), who takes care of the family — and their pet dog — with clockwork precision.

Based on Cuarón’s own maid when he was growing up, Cleo is seen cleaning the driveway as the movie opens, and we later see her doing the laundry, taking the four children to school and helping out in the kitchen. For the most part, Cleo hardly speaks, and appears stoic and solemn, but she shares a beautiful bond with her mistress, Sofia (Marina de Tavira).

Dotted with intimate detail, “Roma” is a splendid study of a family whose idyllic life goes into a tailspin, as does that of the maid. Scenes including the children trying to put out a forest fire while on holiday are so finely shot that they remain etched in memory.

There are many more such moments: A man shot dead in a furniture shop during the 1971 Corpus Christi massacre; Cleo saving two children from drowning in the sea. It is rare to see such thought going into a film, and the compelling black-and-white photography — handled by Cuaron (who also wrote and co-edited) — give “Roma” a strong documentary feel.

The film continues to make headlines after appearing on Netflix on Dec. 14. It premiered at the Venice Film Festival, where it clinched the Golden Lion for best picture, and is now on the first shortlist for the 2019 foreign language Oscar.

Cuaron, who gave us the exhilarating “Y Tu Mama Tambien,” and fantasies such as “Gravity” and “Children of Men,” has created a neorealist work that is both grand in scale and extraordinarily intimate.

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