

# Frustrated love, fascism & genius

## Little Ashes

The complexities of Salvador Dali's genius and his friendships with Federico García Lorca and Luis Buñuel, combine to create an intriguing feature-length production from Paul Morrison, released in cinemas across the UK this April.

Since his death in 1989, Salvador Dali has held a huge fascination in the public imagination. The original eccentric artist, Dali delights because his genius and his notoriety combined succinctly to become one of the first modern celebrities with intrigue lying as much with his sexual deviances as with his eclectic array of Surrealist works. *Little Ashes* is an original screenplay from Philippa Goslett, which explores the notions of creativity, genius, love and passion amidst a background of political and social upheaval during the rise of fascism in Spain.

Oscar-nominated director, Paul Morrison, was drawn to "a very intimate couple of love triangles, set in a really exciting political time of great turbulence. All of my films are about personal lives and politics." The film focuses the cataclysmic events of the period onto a personal scale of triangles between friends and lovers fraught with passion, jealousy, genius and guilt. Dali arrives at the Academia de San Fernando with an unnerving combination of arrogance and shyness, and is immediately drawn into the decadent artistic circle of burgeoning poet Lorca, and pioneering filmmaker Buñuel. As Dali's reputation grows, he and his closeted friend Lorca draw closer to develop a love affair, which both stimulates their creativity and frustrates Lorca's religious beliefs. As the homophobic, Buñuel, jealous and angry at the blossoming bond between his friends, leaves to seek artistic fame in Paris, Lorca and Dali's relationship becomes increasingly intense, but never to the point of consummation, until Dali follows in the footsteps of Buñuel to establish his own notoriety. While Lorca maintains his liberal beliefs in Spain, Dali's reputation escalates in Paris to the bizarre, overt eccentricities that dominate the artist's legacy today.

A UK-Spanish co-production, the cast is comprised of both British and Spanish actors and amidst the English dialogue, Lorca's verse is preserved in its original Spanish. "The rhythm and sound and look of Spanish are absolutely beautiful. We wanted to keep what we could of that, pay homage to the poems," and here the film hovers delicately between fiction and reality. The use of Spanish verse lifts the viewer momentarily out of the story, reminds us of Lorca's own short but prolific career, and of the influences of these seminal figures on contemporary culture. Morrison's direction occupies unusual territory in remaining true to the period and to historical accuracy while creating a contemporary feel in both structure and subject matter. "Part of the aesthetic of the film was

to be very contemporary and not to make a costume drama, so a lot of the shots were handheld. Although it is period, I think all the issues are very contemporary, very modern, it needed to have a grittiness."

A series of rapid fire images, from newsreel footage, dreams, popular culture of the time and from *Little Ashes'* own archive, intersperse the narrative at a few points along the film, providing both an exposition onto outside events, and embedding Lorca's experiences into a political context. Morrison also effectively utilises these intervals to reveal Lorca's own insecurities and lurid imaginings of Dali and Buñuel's adventures in Paris, solidifying the film's intriguing mix of two levels — one of personal struggle and passion, and another of outside celebrity and political inclinations. Despite such a disconcerting pulsation of events taking place before the viewer, Morrison was keen not to imitate the work of the Surrealists and to find "our own language for the film. We made a conscious decision not to shoot a surrealist film, but it was fine to quote from *La Chien Andalou*, because that was very important in terms of the break between Luis, Salvador and Federico." The intervals serve to contextualise the original screenplay, rather than to ape the work of Dali and Luis.

As a director, Morrison's inspiration was more focused on location, "I can only go so far with the written work, actually being in the places is far more important to me, being in the valley where Lorca was shot, walking around the fields where he grew up, because he was so close to the earth." Furthermore, Morrison's experiences in 21<sup>st</sup> century Spain served to inform his interpretation of Lorca's closeted homosexuality, and early struggles to ally this with his devout Catholicism. "The more time I spent in Spain, the deeper we got into the politics of what this meant in Spain and the more you realise that in many ways it's still a deeply conservative country. Although the veneer is very modern, both things still co-exist and the legacy of the civil war is only beginning to be worked out." As an inheritance to this conservatism, it's interesting to note that, "the discoverer of this story was an Irishman Ian Gibson. Somehow it has taken non Spanish people to talk about it, we're able to say things that maybe the Spanish people weren't comfortable with saying."

Dali maintained for a large part of his life that no affair occurred between him and Lorca, but confessions towards the end of his life have opened speculation into the full extent of the relationship.





Goslett's screenplay never sees the relationship consummated because of Dali's aversion to sexual contact. Instead, in a brutally intense scene, Lorca has sex with Magdalena, a young woman also making her name in this artistic clique as a journalist who is infatuated with the oblivious Lorca. Meanwhile Dali looks on the scene, initiating his now infamous voyeurism for the bedroom antics of others. This becomes the turning point of the film. "I think that scene is a turning point because it is a

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consummation on one level of Federico and Salvador's relationship; that's as close as they'll ever get to making love, and it's a travesty. It's kind of abusive." Beyond this point Dali develops his eccentricities to the extreme, and engages in a flurry of insane creativity. "At that time, he made a number of paintings that were fiercely honest, soul-bearing, self-critical, and almost masochistic. And I would say it was his best work, his most honest work." Lorca's relationship with Magdalena completes the second triangle of the piece, and provides a refreshingly open antidote to the subversive manipulations of Dali and Lorca's homoerotic encounters.

Brian Sewell famously described his experiences of Dali as "engaging others in orgies of uninhibited sexual congregation, heterosexual, homosexual and both in combination, while he watched, fully clothed, the voyeur fumbling in his trousers." Eyewitness accounts such as these, combined with Dali's own references in later life, ensure that there is ammunition for such graphic scenes. None-the-less, Morrison and Goslett have still chosen to depict private scenes, enabling a degree of speculation and poetic license and in this manner the film hovers between myth and reality, "that was an ongoing discussion as the screenplay developed. Obviously there's a lot that can't be known about

the details or the relationship, but the broad brush of what happened is as true as we can get it, in terms of interviews given with Dali towards the end of his life and testimonies of people who knew them both."

These fluctuations between myth and reality are somewhat mirrored by Dali's cultivation of celebrity for himself to the point where his caprices, calculated or otherwise, came to overshadow his undeniable talent. Dali became the first true celebrity artist, living as the art as much

as living *for* the art in a manner that continues to dominate contemporary art today. An acclaimed poet in his own right, Lorca naturally emerges as the film's focal point, the character who elicits the audience's sympathy in contrast to the callous, materialistic, and infamously cowardly

Dali. Morrison echoes this sentiment, "Lorca stayed close to Spain, his people, the countryside, his religion in his own kind of way. That's why he's so revered. For me a lot of Dali's later art leaves me cold, because I felt that he lost touch with a part of himself. It's incredibly clever, you have to admire it, but it hasn't got the depth and the passion of some of those earlier pictures."

Goslett describes the film: "It's about the choice between genius and love" and Morrison recognises the dramatic tendencies of such a dichotomy. He comments: "It's not a choice between creativity and love, it's a choice between manufacturing yourself as a public genius, as a public creation. In that sense, both Dali and the film are very contemporary, a lot of the art world now is concerned about celebrity, how do you make yourself a celebrity and what does that mean, what value does that add to your art?" These questions dominate our attitudes today and make *Little Ashes* as much about ourselves as about the central figures involved.

*Little Ashes* is released in UK cinemas on 24 April 2009. For further information please visit [www.littleashes-themovie.com](http://www.littleashes-themovie.com).