

‘El Agua’ Review: After the Flood, the Legends

This film from Elena López Riera follows what happens when floods drench a village in southeastern Spain.

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El agua

In the southeastern Spanish village where the director Elena López Riera grew up — and where her debut feature, “El Agua,” is set — water is both a boon and a curse. This dry region doesn’t get enough rain for its lemon and orange crops, but when it does pour, there are frequently devastating floods. And as is often the case with forces we cannot control or understand, it’s the village’s women who are blamed for nature’s caprices.

In “El Agua,” aquatic myths ensnare the teenage dreams of 17-year-old Ana (Luna Pamies). In a series of documentary interviews interspersed throughout the film, locals relate the myth of the women who have water “inside them,” who disappear whenever a flood arrives. Then there is the curse that supposedly afflicts Ana, her mother (Nieve de Medina) and her grandmother (Bárbara Lennie), three fiercely independent women who live together. Ana yearns to leave the stifling village and finds hope in the mysterious José (Alberto Olmo), who claims to have returned to the village after a trip abroad.

The movie weaves together several threads, of which Ana’s coming-of-age is the weakest: Her adolescent rebellions and her fling with José play out rather predictably, never quite evoking the lust or portent that the film’s folklore suggests. But “El Agua” succeeds as a portrait of the village’s traditions, both manual and cultural, brought to life by a largely nonprofessional cast (including Pamies, a striking discovery). Scenes involving pigeon races, farmers working the land with their hands, and women caring for and grooming each other all glow with a tactile sense of naturalism, which makes the documentary footage of floods that closes the film all the more gutting.

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Not rated. In Spanish, with subtitles. Running time: 1 hour 44 minutes. In theaters.