



## PREVIEW

# La chimera

### La chimera

Directed by: Alice Rohrwacher

Production Companies : Tempesta,

Rai Cinema, Ad Vitam Production,

Amka Films Productions,

RSI Radiotelevisione Svizzera SRG SSR,

Arte France Cinéma

Executive Producers: Eli Bush, Jeff Deutchman,

Alexandra Henochsberg, Alessio Lazzareschi,

Manuela Melissano, Pierre-François Piet, Tom

Quinn, Michael Weber

Produced by: Carlo Cresto Dina, Paolo Del Brocco,

Manuela Melissano

Casting Directors: Chiara Polizzi, Fiona Weir

Location Manager: Laura Petruccelli

Script Supervisor: Sara Cavani

Written by: Alice Rohrwacher

Cinematography: Hélène Louvart

Edited by: Nelly Quettier

Production Designer: Erita Frigato

Costume Designer: Loredana Buscemi

Make-up Designer: Esmé Sciaroni

Hair Designer: Daniela Tartari

Sound Designer: François Wolf

Sound Editor: Ilu Seydoux

Sound Effects Editor: Henry Sims

Cast:

Josh O'Connor (*Arthur*)

Carol Duarte (*Italia*)

Vincenzo Nemolato (*Pirro*)

Alba Rohrwacher (*Spartaco*)

Isabella Rossellini (*Flora*)

Lou Roy-Lecollinet (*Melodie*)

Giuliano Mantovani (*Jerry*)

Gian Piero Capretto (*Mario*)

Melchiorre Pala (*Melchiorre*)

Ramona Fiorini (*Fabiana*)

Yle Yara Vianello (*Beniamina*)

Barbara Chiesa (*Nella*)

Elisabetta Perotto (*Vera*)

Italy 2023

133 mins

Digital

Courtesy of Curzon Film

In partnership with Glasgow Film Festival.

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**SIGHT**  
**SOUND**

Enigmatic and intriguing, the newest drama from Italian magic realist director Alice Rohrwacher features lead Josh O'Connor as rugged archaeologist gone jailbird Arthur, newly released and coming home to reconnect with his ex-crew of drifting graverobbers.

*La chimera* was inspired by the director's own experience growing up in Tuscany in the 1980s, and this location provides the perfect setting for a story underpinned by elements of fantasy, magic and spirituality. A cool, deliberately winding story touches on themes of grief, memory and heritage, also toying with ideas of morality and the soul. Layered with a warm sense of community, it's a transcendent drama with something unique to say.

Faye D. Effard, [bfi.org.uk](https://bfi.org.uk), 20 February 2024

Weeds grow through the cracks in every pavement in Alice Rohrwacher's wayward, wondrous *La chimera*. They twine through the flagstones outside the crumbling Tuscan manor where Flora (Isabella Rossellini) awaits the return of a daughter who disappeared, imperiously ignoring the visiting chatter of the four who did not. They straggle between the sleepers of the railway tracks outside the abandoned Riparbella station house, tripping up the little kids – hair sticky from headlice ointment – who play on them. Just like the ragged life that bursts and floods the frames of Helène Louvart's wild, windswept photography, the weeds of *La chimera* can't be stopped and won't be tamed, reaching up into the sunlight from the cool, dark underground. Which is also, of course, where the dead live.

Connecting underground and overground, the realm of the dead and the land of the living, there's Arthur (Josh O'Connor) a young Englishman in an increasingly grimy linen suit, who seems to have settled and sprouted here: a seed carried in on the breeze. It is the early 1980s and Arthur is rudely awoken from a train-lulled dream of his gone-girlfriend, Beniamina, by the conductor asking for his ticket. He is returning to the region after a stint in jail for the crime of grave-robbing. Arthur and his gang of local *tombaroli* have for some years made their living using Arthur's uncanny knack for dowsing to locate and plunder ancient Etruscan burial sites, fencing the booty to a shady dealer known as Spartaco.

He immediately falls back into his old *tombarolo* habits. Though Rohrwacher sometimes films these raids in the knockabout fast-motion of a one-reeler silent, Arthur is worn-down and heartsick, as frayed as the cuffs of his ever-dirtier suit. Despite the unqualified faith of his rapsallion gang, and the troubadour who sings songs about him like he's a folk hero, every new find seems to take more out of him, leaving him stubbly and surly and scowling – imagine an antiheroic Indiana Jones as played by Elliott Gould as written by TS Eliot. (O'Connor's performance is one of the film's many miracles in making such an improbable character feel real).

## IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

### Funday Preview: Robot Dreams

Sun 3 Mar 12:00

### Preview: La Chimera

Sun 3 Mar 17:30

### Preview: Origin

Mon 4 Mar 17:50

### Preview: High & Low – John Galiano

Mon 4 Mar 20:40

### Kinoteka Polish Film Festival Opening Night

### London Premiere: Green Border Zielona granica +

Q&A with director Agnieszka Holland

Wed 6 Mar 19:00

### Woman with a Movie Camera International

### Women's Day Preview: Banel & Adama + Q&A

with director Ramata-Toulaye Sy

Fri 8 Mar 18:10

### Woman with a Movie Camera International

### Women's Day Preview: Elaha

Fri 8 Mar 20:45

### TV Preview: Inside No. 9: The Final Series + Q&A

with Reece Shearsmith, Steve Pemberton and

executive producer Adam Tandy

Mon 11 Mar 18:15

### Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI IMAX

Mon 11 Mar 18:15

### TV Preview: Mandy + Q&A with Diane Morgan

Tue 12 Mar 18:10

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Only in Flora's delighted presence does he relax and smile – 'Arthur, my only friend!' she calls him – perhaps because, while he's lying to her about her daughter Benjamina's fate, he can lie to himself too. But it's also at Flora's that he meets Italia (Carol Duarte), Flora's 'tone-deaf' singing student, who is daffy and gorgeous in a Miranda July sort of way and who reminds Arthur of the pleasures of topside life, despite the downward lure of dreams and visions in which Benjamina's red dress unravels and the dead ask him for all their stuff back.

No description of what happens in *La chimera* can adequately convey what happens in *La chimera*, which feels like watching an occurrence of ancient magic, from the point of view of the spell. Arthur is the protagonist and his gradual awakening to the fact that his lifestyle is built on a desecration of the very things he loves, gives the film its structure. But Rohrwacher's real story here – splitting the difference between the earthiness of *The Wonders* (2014) and the whimsicality of *Happy as Lazzaro* (2018) (and surpassing them both in vivid strangeness) – is the story of the Tuscan ground and the beautiful secrets that sleep beneath our feet.

In a transcendent sequence – knowingly modelled on the catacombs scene in Fellini's *Roma* (1972) but further removing the human element – Arthur discovers his biggest find yet, buried incongruously in the shadow of a massive power plant. It is a long-forgotten shrine that has lain undisturbed in glimmering blackness for millennia. Before Arthur and his raiders of the lost dark enter from above, Rohrwacher breaks a rule: she grants us a privileged look inside, at the silent grace of its white marble statue, at the humble votive offerings left by the pre-Christian devout and at the brightly-painted frescoes of birds and animals that adorn the walls. The moment the gang breaks through, a rush of air steals the colour from the murals. Not even Arthur has seen what we have, though he implicitly understands the tragic paradox. So many inestimable treasures that we look upon with awe have lost half their beauty to the looking.

Rohrwacher is fascinated by the ransacked archaeology of Arthur's psyche. He simultaneously worships history, preserving a little cache of artefacts of no value to anyone but himself, while also destroying it for money. So perhaps the only perfectly ironic ending is for him to become a part of history. Through the songs being sung about his exploits. Through the way his story grows within the crevices of Italy's long, striated past. And through *La chimera* itself, a joyous, masterful work of folk magic that plays like a discovery dug up from the ground where it has been for centuries, just waiting, in a rebellious reversal of that tragic shrine scene, to burst into full bloom before the gaze of living eyes.

Jessica Kiang, *Sight and Sound*, [bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound](http://bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound), 1 June 2023