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Father's Chair

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By ANDREW BARKER

The old fortune-cookie wisdom about the journey being more important than the destination is emphatically underscored by Brazilian Sundance entry "Father's Chair." Directed by first-time feature helmer Luciano Moura, this low-key, quietly crowdpleasing odyssey about a yuppie father searching through rural Sao Paulo for his missing teenage son is highly engaging, even if the ultimate emotional payoff lands with less impact than intended. Tautly assembled and buoyed by a terrific lead performance from Wagner Moura ("Elite Squad"), the pic has strong domestic B.O. potential; further international fest play is hardly out of the question.

Chronically fussing with his glasses and wearing an expression of permanent harassment, Moura manages to evoke a slightly more debonair Paul Giamatti as protagonist Theo, a fastidious urban doctor whose marriage to Branca (Mariana Lima) is entering the messiest stages of its breakup. A brutal opening-reel argument between the two ends up grazing their shy 15-year-old son, Pedro (Bras Moreau Antunes), who immediately leaves for a friend's house. When he doesn't come home, the couple begins to unravel his previously ignored pattern of confusing behavior -- he recently sold his computer, skipped out on his friend, and has apparently purchased a horse -- and Theo takes off into the Wild West of the provincial countryside in pursuit.

With this, the stage seems perfectly set for a "Taken"-style rampage through Brazil's sinister underworld; that it doesn't shake out that way at all is the source of the film's slyest humor and deepest pathos. For one, Theo is phenomenally ill equipped to play the crusading avenger -- an attempted fistfight ends with more social awkwardness than violence, and a daring last-minute getaway occurs only after he's (rather politely) stolen an elderly man's cell phone. Further, the savage world outside the city limits turns out to harbor far less malice than expected, with everyone from favela dwellers to itinerant farmers and teenage ravers providing key assistance.

Most refreshingly, rather than heightening tension as the chase nears its end, director Moura's touch actually grows lighter as the search progresses, with Theo's fear and desperation giving way to admiration for his son's resourcefulness and hidden talents as he pieces together his story. One might quibble with the (perhaps intentional) ease with which Theo assembles these clues -- nearly everyone he encounters seems to have some new piece of information to offer -- and the overarching themes of father-son reconciliation are lathered on a bit too topically to really soak under the skin. But the finely attuned portrayal of Theo's growing sense of liberation in such less-

than-ideal circumstances is enough to overshadow such shortcomings.

Production design and cinematography are topnotch throughout, as the film maintains a consistently bright, vivid aesthetic even as it veers from ultra-modern suburbs to shantytown slums.

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