

BERLINALE 2020: COMPETITION (3/3)



Fans of the early French *nouvelle vague* are likely to feel a bit nostalgic with Philippe Garrel's ***The Salt of Tears***, not least because of its monochrome palette and existential undertones. The film follows young Luc (Logann Antuofermo) as he – repeatedly – discovers young love, while on his path to fulfil his father's dream of joining a renowned Parisian school and becoming a cabinetmaker.

While the narrator and piano score almost immediately fool us into thinking that Luc and Djemila (Oulaya Amamra) are destined for each other, the provincial youngster's sudden interest for his childhood friend Geneviève (Louise Chevillotte) will lead them all to heartbreak. Inevitably, Luc's dishonesty and debauchery lead him to 'meet his equal' in Betsy (Souheila Yacoub). In what feels like a subtle nod to Truffaut's ***Jules et Jim***, Luc then has to put up with hosting Betsy's *other* love interest, Paco (Martin Mesnier) in his own flat. And while his own heart gets slowly broken, Luc remains oblivious to his father's deteriorating health.

The Salt of Tears is beautifully shot, and balances its more serious tone with some cute, often subtle, humour throughout. However, don't go see it

looking for catharsis or expecting to be blown away by its originality. Chances are, you've seen something like it before.

Yet, as also demonstrated by ***My Little Sister***, there is nothing wrong with *not* trying to reinvent the wheel. The film, codirected by Stéphanie Chuat and Véronique Reymond, pieces together bits of family dramas that may feel somewhat familiar, and yet amounts to more than its constituent parts.

The film centres on Lisa (Nina Hoss), a playwright whose personal life takes a few unexpected turns when her twin brother and stage actor Sven (Lars Eidinger) starts losing the battle against leukemia. When their mother (Marthe Keller) proves to be an unsuitable carer for Sven in Berlin, Lisa needs to sacrifice a comfortable life with her young children and husband Martin (Jens Albinus) in Switzerland to care for him herself. As Sven's body begins to decay, Lisa is called to make an impossible decision: should she care more for her dying brother, or stick to a life that was somehow a compromise for her to begin with?

Mediocre child acting aside, the performances are superb, particularly Hoss's (and we were really rooting for her to win Best Actress, shame!). The precise writing brings to life the complexity of the film's characters, never making it easy for the viewer to choose sides or settle on one feeling. The themes explored are presented with a certain raw honesty, accentuated by the frantic aesthetic of a hand-held camera throughout. All in all, what could have been another superficial exploration of a family struck by cancer is presented with commendable sensitivity (and a subtle touch of comedy), through an unexpectedly multi-faceted perspective.

What *did* feel slightly superficial was Abel Ferrara's eccentric portrayal of Jungian philosophy in his latest work, ***Siberia***. But then again, the film goes so many places (literally), that we are forced to see past that quite quickly. The film's attempt to unravel the psyche through the unconscious mind makes it all very surreal, of course, and to some extent appealing – but it's no Lynch either.

With the opening credits still rolling, the narrator-protagonist Clint (Willem Dafoe) retells a childhood story of his, set in the titular Siberia. When we finally see his face, he's serving drinks to clients he can't communicate with verbally: first an Inuit, and later on a woman who only speaks Russian. The film starts showing its true colours when her mother encourages Clint to have sex with her very pregnant daughter. From then on, we follow suit as Clint jumps onto a dog sled and wanders off to all sorts of places, presumably a representation of his unconscious thoughts.

Sled rides in snowy Siberia, strolls through sandy deserts, casual mass executions, and violent encounters with wild bears are complemented by sexual intercourse at random intervals with women from Clint's past (and *almost* including his mother too). But once Dafoe ventures into the depths of a cave that brings to mind Lars von Trier's ***The House That Jack Built***, the viewers are really in for a treat.

"Your reason is an obstacle" Clint is told – so Ferrara abandons all reason, in search for Jungian clarity. A father-son confrontation, where Dafoe also plays Clint's father (with some shaving cream on so we can tell them apart), is only the beginning of the hilarious remainder of the film. The nonsensical dialogue will be delightful to some, but might completely annoy others. Whatever the case, ***Siberia*** is relatively merciful at a runtime of 92 minutes. Our favourite bits were probably the very random heavy metal concert and the flopping fish reciting Nietzsche: we got some very pure, unexpected laughs from those, but that may well be the film's only redeeming quality. Nevertheless, it was a festival experience!



And so when people said they were utterly disappointed by Natalia Meta's ***The Intruder***, we went in with an open mind. To call it a great film would probably be an exaggeration, but we strongly believe that there is nothing wrong with a fun B-movie. The story is probably full of more plot holes than we can count, otherwise it was actually clever and completely escaped us. But over-the-top sci-fi gimmicks, metaphysical elements, film *noir* vibes, and dreams within dreams all combine to give a very unique experience the more we think about it.

The protagonist Inés (Érica Rivas) can sense vibrations inside of her related to a metaphysical intruder (Nahuel Pérez Biscayart) who wants to inhabit her

conscience and who invades her reality through dreams, claiming he loves her. She works at a dubbing studio where she becomes the voice of a kinky Japanese porn star, and tries to get rid of the potentially multiple intruders in her mind with some sort of very questionable electromagnetic coupling device, after a senior woman with log-lady vibes convinces her that's the way to go. Hilarity ensues very frequently throughout the film, often because of some clumsy moments in the dialogue and plot, though it remains unclear whether that was definitely intentional. We would like to believe it was.

The whole film seems to explore relationships – whether erotic or maternal – through an oneiric abstraction that is surreal to say the least. We would never claim it's a masterpiece, and maybe most people are right to call it mediocre. But just because it has no political message and doesn't really conform to the traditional formulas, doesn't mean it can't be original and fascinating to watch.

If we were to take a wild guess at what the hidden meaning of it all might be, we'd say it's a film that takes a bizarre look, through a psychoanalytic lens, at a woman who has trouble trusting the people in her life who claim they love her. Perhaps she fears the possibility of losing herself in an intense relationship – losing her voice: that might explain the very uncanny fact that she undergoes a literal vocal mutation, with the film culminating as she sings on stage, producing at least three different voices from her own vocal cords while the credits roll. Definitely a contender for cult film status.

The other Latin American contestant at the Berlinale was ***All the Dead Ones***, by directors Caetano Gotardo and Marco Dutra. It seems ironic that we're covering a film by this title in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, but oh well – the show must go on. The story is set in São Paulo in the winter of 1899-1900, shortly after the abolishment of slavery in Brazil: the wealthy families are having trouble adjusting to a life without servants, while former slaves are having difficulty blending in with the post-slavery ruling class.

The period piece works interestingly well as a modern-day comment on white privilege. Unsurprisingly, considering the title, it blends in ghost story elements to bring an important moment for Brazil to life. Everyone comes to life so much, in fact, that it's not precisely clear when the twist in the story is introduced (are they dead or alive?) – but the title does prepare us for it. And while the ending and the anticipation of this twist was done in a fairly basic way, the film nevertheless manages to successfully build some amount of tension throughout.

The story kicks off in the São Paulo household of an aristocratic family falling apart, right after the death of housemaid Josefina (Alaíde Costa). Elderly matriarch Isabel (Thaia Perez) and her mentally challenged daughter Ana (Carolina Bianchi) are left to care for the house and each other, while Ana's sister Maria (Clarissa Kiste) attempts to keep everything in running order when not in her monastery. When Isabel's ailing body grows weaker, Maria bribes their former slave Iná (Mawusi Tulani) to pretend-perform an African ritual and heal Isabel, in an attempt to calm Ana's obsessions that that is their only viable option.

Some would argue that ***All the Dead Ones*** is guilty of cheap symbolism, but it is the apparent lack of direction in the narrative that is hardest to cope with. The beautiful picture and sound design, along with some solid performances, do make up for the film's slow pace – but just about. While the topic explored deserved the spotlight, it is doubtful that this will be a memorable viewing experience for wider audiences. It won't be painful, but it won't be a revelation either, unless someone's looking for an excuse to delve into Brazilian history.

