

Bahar Zmien (Of Time and the Sea)



Another brick in the wall: Ruth Borg (left) in Peter Sant's baffling allegory Bahar Zmien, and Nancy Calamatta



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MALTESE-AUSTRALIAN filmmaker Peter Sant returns to the native isle to present a beautifully shot and occasionally inspired experimental feature Bahar Żmien (Of Time and the Sea), which had a private screening earlier this week in anticipation of its short debut run at Spazju Kreattiv at St James Cavalier later this month.

Co-written with novelist Alex Vella Gera, the film is unapologetically devoid of a conventional plot and boasts some high game performances from both veteran and fresh local acting talent.

It is set in an entirely archetypal space, with its characters rooted in an atemporal version of Malta in which microwave dinners co-exist with Quixotic knights in uselessly shining armour, and where the 'King' (Narcy Calamatta thrilling to a crusty ogre role with gusto) is fading away.

It is a slow-moving experience running entirely on symbols, as delivered through the familiar rocky, garigue-eaten seaside landscape and stilted dialogue that – let's face it – makes the best of some bad habits Maltese actors can't seem to shake off.

But while it's tempting to say that cinematographer Martin Testar should take the bulk of the credit here – the

setting really is a character – it is in fact Ruth Borg who is to be commended for providing this experiment in abstraction with a real emotional centre. Her prowess as a physical performer shines through in every scene, especially the non-verbal ones, where her intuitive way with facial expression sucks us into her plight... even if we're puzzled as to where all of this is going.

In less adventurous hands, this could have been a roll-call of clichés; luckily, Sant allows his Imp of the Perverse to freshen up our idea of what Maltese iconography can look like on screen.

Interview with director Peter Sant by Vincent Poli, editor-in-chief for Marseille International Film Festival daily

How would you tell the story of Bahar Żmien – a three-island archipelago where a solitary king lives with his two daughters? Is it inspired by a text? Another source? Your dreams?

Yes, that's basically it. Of course, there's so much going on in the film it's difficult to pin it down... A lot of what was written stems from a myriad of literary influences such as, St Augustine's Confessions. The central character, the girl in the orange dress, is directly influenced by books X and XI where St Augustine reaches fever pitch, grappling with remembering and forgetfulness. It's these types of sensations that also helped form the film's structure. The script was written so that the narrative unfolds and folds in on itself and was

pushed even further during the edit as well as the sound design with sounds echoing back and forth, a bit like Augustine's text. For me this helped to create a kind of timelessness. Then of course there's this idea of the crippled king with his kingdom in ruins which comes from the unfinished legend of the Fisher King, the bleeding wound, the kingdom in ruins etc.

There is a great sense of mystery in Bahar Żmien, in the way that the audience seems to be kept away from the real story and its outcomes...

Personally, I think of it more as a sense of absence rather than mystery.

There's the absence of the mother from the family, animals from the island and of course the fact that none of the characters have names. This allowed me to develop a very complex set of relations, not only between the characters themselves, but also between the visible and the invisible, the said and the unsaid. It's through this and other similar techniques that I attempted to create this sense of absence and uncertainty but at the same time maintain a level of momentum and intrigue.

Could you talk about the frame and lighting (especially the difference between interiors/exterior)? You often keep some distance between the character and the camera...

Martin Testar (DoP) and I worked on the visual style over several months leading up to the shoot. We always gravitated toward the extremes, but at the

same time tried to avoid things becoming overly stylised. We developed a few techniques that we employed throughout, like for instance, using only a thin slither of earth or sky for the exterior frames, or doing away with practical lights and windows for the interiors, which was a little daunting at first but ended up being quite liberating.

As for the distance between the camera and the characters this was to permit the surroundings some magnitude. I mean the area where we shot hasn't got the grand scale of, let's say the Kings Canyon, but if you look at it the right way it could be any size. That's why I wanted to play with perspective, starting with empty frames where viewers establish their own sense of scale and then having a character walk into frame and disrupt it. The frames are also almost always static and at times quite lengthy, this forces the viewer to take a more active role and become the editor by dissecting portions of the frame. But most importantly for me, it allowed the audio to creep up the pecking order that, unlike the picture, remains in constant motion.

Do not miss this cinematic brilliance that is Bahar Żmien – it will have its Maltese premiere at Spazju Kreattiv on 27, 29 and 30 December! This Maltese production offers a local touch yet still gives off an international flair. Tickets are out for this debut feature film produced and directed by Peter Sant and made with the support of the Malta Film Fund.