



CHESTER FILM SOCIETY PRESENTS:

## TRANSYLVANIA

2006 ROMANIA 103 MINUTES

Directed by Tony Gatlif

Starring Asia Argento, Amira Casar

Director Tony Gatlif is the French-Algerian chronicler of European Roma who, with Latcho Drom, Gadjoo Dilo and Exils, has mined gypsy tradition to tell stories as exotic, hypnotic and darkly romantic as the delirious reels which weave their way through his work.

Transylvania returns Gatlif to Romania, where in 1997 he set his most successful film to date, *Gadjo Dilo*, and his concerns haven't altered much. A road movie, a love story, a despatch from the front line of a culture rarely given space in world cinema, *Transylvania* is a film about identity and persecution in the hinterlands of Eastern Europe, where the raw business of life and death is inextricably bound up with music, superstition and love.

This time, Gatlif has two genuine stars of European cinema. Asia Argento plays Zingarina, a young Italian woman who arrives in Transylvania with a couple of girlfriends in search of the Romanian musician who got her pregnant. Zingarina's search takes her deep into the Roma's elemental heart, and then to the brink of madness. It is travelling trader Tchangalo (Ünel, the brooding star of Fatih Akin's German-Turkish drama *Head-On*) who eventually drags her back, and the pair achieve a strange bond born of their outsider status, and the shared beat of their damaged hearts.

Gatlif's films have never been slick. It's the struggle and resilience of gypsy culture that keeps drawing him back. *Transylvania*'s story is skeletal and the dialogue sparse. Instead this is a cinema of landscapes, music, ritual, and faces: every wrinkle around the eye is the start of a story that ends with the mournful wail of a violin. *Transylvania* is at once an authentic and fanciful film that celebrates gypsy culture's ethnicity, its modern reality and its ancient myths.

Much of *Transylvania* has the style and urgency of a documentary, and in the film's early stages there's so much going on that Gatlif seems uncertain where to point his camera. Rightly, he follows his leads, whose semi-improvised performances are raw and instinctive.

Appropriately, given the film's location, Zingarina's grief over her lost Transylvanian lover takes the form of a hysteria which, the film suggests, is actually a supernatural possession of the heart.

In a more conventional film Argento's wild, sultry, tattooed heroine would carry the story on her own. Here she's usurped by Ünel, whose heavy-eyed, scowling trader, shackled up in a car and breaking beer bottles over his head, might be the entrepreneurial cousin of his character in *Head-On*. Draping a tree with chandeliers, busting Zingarina out of an exorcism, and later helping her give birth in the back of his car in the snowy Romanian wilderness, Ünel's unforced physical charisma suggests a Brando of the Carpathian Mountains.

Whether the polyglot dialogue, which unfolds in French, Italian, Romanian and English, is intended to suggest the irrelevancy of words for these characters' powerful drives, or simply because Gatlif relishes the sense of cultures colliding, the film's emotional language is its music, much of it performed by the characters, and which pursues Zingarina - literally at one point - everywhere she goes.

The problems lie in the film's drifting lack of structure. Gatlif himself describes *Transylvania* as opening where most love stories end, but his own story fails to take proper shape. Zingarina's search for the father of her unborn child is overtaken by her descent into lovesick madness, and then by her relationship with Tchangalo, but there's more packed into the premise than the subsequent journey can take in, as if Gatlif has started down this road without knowing quite where it goes.

As a fault, it's strangely appropriate, yet *Transylvania* catches the moment and the mystery of life in this rundown corner of Europe. Those are homemade violins and accordions on the soundtrack, but the film's spirit is pure rock 'n' roll.

Channel 4

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TERRIBLE FANTASTIC