

THE OLIVE TREE (El Olivo)

Spain (2016) 99 minutes

Director: Iciar Bollain

Cast: Anna Castillo (Alma), Javier Gutiérrez (Alcachofa),
Pep Ambròs (Rafa), Manuel Cucala (Ramón)



Screening 13 September 2017 at Swindon Arts Centre

Synopsis

Alma is a 20-year-old girl and adores her grandfather, a man who has not spoken for years. When the elderly man also refuses to eat, the girl decides to recover the millenary tree that the family sold against his will. In order to succeed, she needs to count on her uncle, a victim of the crisis, her friend Rafa, and her whole town to help her. The problem is to find out where in Europe the olive tree is.

Reviews



A heartfelt, low-key, sweet-natured movie written by Paul Laverty and scripted for his partner, the Spanish director Icíar Bollain.

It has a touch of Ealing, almost, but with an undertow of sadness and social comment. Bollain shapes the performances well. Anna Castillo is Anna, a young woman very close to her grandfather (Manuel Cucala). The old man has retreated into depression and dementia since his grown-up children cynically uprooted and sold off his beloved 2,000-year-old olive tree, against his will, to pay for a now bankrupt tourist restaurant business.

Anna discovers that the buyer of the tree is a Düsseldorf energy company, which has placed it in its glitzy lobby and uses it as a letterhead symbol of its entirely spurious green credentials. So Anna bamboozles some friends and family into going with her in a borrowed flatbed truck on a crazily quixotic mission to rescue the tree and bring it back home, and her wild plan energises German environmental campaigners. The film has gentleness and charm.

Peter Bradshaw, The Guardian

The sunny saffron glow of Sergi Gallardo's widescreen lensing doesn't go far in masking the hard times that have hit the agricultural community of Canet, in Spain's parched Castellon province. 20-year-old Alma's family has been lovingly producing olive oil from their ancestral grove for centuries, but the fragile economic climate has forced them into industrial poultry farming instead. Such changes are evidently painful to Alma's proud grandfather Ramón, who has lately retreated into a state of near-catatonia. Alma, however, believes his depression is rooted in a more specific loss: that of his single most treasured olive tree, a richly gnarled, thousand-year-old specimen...

With her choppy undercut hairdo and wiry physicality, Castillo carries proceedings with just the right degree of toughness and strength of conviction, playing Alma's vulnerability against her resilience all the while. She has a most endearingly crumpled foil in Gutierrez, who wrings the pic's biggest laughs from Adri's careworn bewilderment at his niece's ideals, with a doleful undertow of knowing guilt over what has caused it. For the role of Ramon, casting director Mireia Suarez has served the film well by considering amateur locals: while he's spryly game in his scenes with Alma's younger self, the very skin of Cucala's hands has a labour-shaped authenticity that can't be forged.

Accomplished craft elements are all of a piece with the pic's unobtrusive, summer-faded naturalism, with extra credit due to Pascal Gaigne's lovely score, which sustains a tricky balance of lilting melancholy throughout.

Guy Lodge, Variety.com

Film Facts

- The film premiered at the Miami International Film festival in May 2017.
- Anna Castillo won the Best New Actress Goya Award 2017 for her role as Alma.
- Paul Laverty got the idea for the film after reading a newspaper article about the selling of ancient trees to Europe or Asia for decorative reasons. He mulled over it for a decade before actually writing it.