

The Olive Tree

Iciar Ballain SP/GER 2016 100m



The Olive Tree blends a simple human drama with contemporary European politics to great effect, in a story that is as symbolic as it is deeply felt.

20-year-old Alma (Anna Castillo) and her family have been forced due to difficult economic times to abandon their historic family business of producing olive oil and turn their land into a poultry farm. When her beloved mute grandfather (Manuel Cucala) falls into a depression and becomes unable to eat, Alma sets out to return his favourite olive tree to him, sold years ago to fund a now-defunct restaurant. Unfortunately, the 2,000-year-old tree now holds pride of place in the lobby of a prestigious German energy company, who want nothing to do with the provincial family. Huge and ancient, the tree becomes the defining image of the film, representing the struggle between global and local economies in Europe and the effects that spread across the continent. The family's underdog plan also captures the imagination of online activist groups, who rally to help the cause but ultimately do more harm than good.

Alma's proud, volatile uncle Arti (Javier Gutiérrez) is by far the most interesting character. Embittered by the injustices done to him during the financial crisis and estranged from his wife and children, he represents a generation of working men cast aside in industries struggling to stay afloat. Creatively using a combination of both professional and amateur actors, the movie manages to inject humour into situations that might otherwise have strayed into overblown sentimentality. Young lead Castillo anchors the film with a sensitive performance that balances her character's tough exterior with the deep love she feels for her grandfather. Director Icíar Bollaín and screenwriter Paul Laverty, who together created 2010's wonderful *Even the Rain*, turn this tale into a sun-dappled fable with equal parts wit, conscience and melancholy.

Isabelle Milton ***The Up-coming***

*Throughout different cultures, the figure of the tree has persistently enjoyed a symbolic and mythic relevance. The very fruits we subsided upon grew from trees, while their oaken trunks provided the raw, woody material necessary for homes, transport and tools. In Classical literature, trees are a haven, with various warriors resting and finding respite from battle beneath their shaded branches: the marital bed of Odysseus is even fashioned from a living olive tree! Trees are further recognised for their benevolence in children's literature, with characters like Winnie the Pooh reaping topiary rewards by scooping honey from bark, and *The Giving Tree* literalising this philanthropic dynamic. However, the tree is privy to darker significance also, with the Grimm brothers swelling lofty perennials for their sinister forests, the antagonistic anthropomorphism of ***The Little Prince's*** baobabs, and, of course, in Christian paradigms, it is a tree that produces mankind's fatal knowledge. As trees reach their spindly branches to the heavens, their dank roots likewise thrust further into the*

deep soil below; a living metaphor for human existence, where we at once grow and flourish while also developing a deep history of memory and experience.

It is no wonder, then, that the central characters of Spain's rather lovely **The Olive Tree** experience such existential seller's regret after auctioning off the family farm's prize olive tree, selling it due to their insurmountable money problems. When she was a girl, tomboyish Alma) climbed the tree and made stories up with her grandfather Ramón the two generations inspired by the evocative whorls that surfaced the magnificent tree. That was then though, and now, 12 years later, Alma is on the edge, both of adulthood and civility. She spends her evenings partying and having it off with strangers (causing much consternation from admirer-from-afar Rafa while in the day gives unwelcome visitors to the farm an egging, and, as a visual indicator of her idiosyncrasy, has the most incredible hair in cinema so far this year. **The Olive Tree** was shortlisted as the Spanish submission for the Best Foreign Language Film at the Oscars: it didn't make the final cut, but that's only because there is no academy award for Best Hair Style, and, if there was, Alma's tramlined-undercut-mullet-with-bangs would have swept it. As Alma rails against the boredom of her surroundings, poor Ramón is broken though: wandering the olive groves catatonically, not speaking but hopeful that one day he will once again witness his bygone, beloved olive tree.

Following this early elegant invocation of Spanish village life, **The Olive Tree** becomes a road movie, with Alma, Rafa and her dyspeptic uncle travelling across Europe in a purloined truck, ostensibly to retrieve the tree before Ramón kicks the bucket. The tree is now the centrepiece of a massive evil corporation's foyer, locked behind the reinforced glass and steel of a skyscraper somewhere in Dusseldorf. Director **Iciar Bollain** contrasts the bucolic calm of the countryside - all wide angles of terracotta dirt and the silver confetti of olive groves - with the urgency of city life, depicted through hurried close ups of disapproving faces and aloof modernity. Although the film's manifest charms just about carry it through, it is during the second act's journey that **The Olive Tree** loses its way a little, with the generic soul searching mechanisms of the road movie slowing down narrative pace, along with one too many picturesque sequences of the truck (with a stolen facsimile of the Statue of Liberty on the back - don't ask) making its way across trans-European highways. "You start the journey and people will help you along the way," states the optimistic Alma, and, sure enough, a group of female Skyping activists heart-warmingly band together to help our ragbag team, and reinforce the film's ideologies of community and co-operation, culminating in a finale that is both moving and narratively satisfying.



For the most part, **The Olive Tree** is beguiling, mainly because of the emotive and utterly captivating performance of its star Castillo. At certain points, the narrative stem wavers, and the film doesn't fully develop the fruits of its environmentally thematic suggestions, but, overall, this is an olive branch worth accepting.

Benjamin Poole *The Movie Waffler*

A poignant family drama, a rhythmic road movie, an alluring fable with undertones and symbols that punctuate a heart-warming modern metaphor, Iciar Bollain's multi-faceted film *The Olive Tree* is a tale rooted deep in cinematic magic.

One of the many charms of *The Olive Tree* is in the astonishing number of ways in which this film can be enjoyed. On the one hand it is a story about Alma (Anna Castillo) and her

love for her dying grandfather (Manuel Cucala) as she sets out on an ill-conceived voyage to recover his beloved olive tree which his family uprooted and sold against his will 12 years prior. But to pigeonhole *The Olive Tree* as a film solely about this relationship and the quest to retrieve a tree, which perhaps may mend a broken family in the process, would be doing a disservice to the wonderful script penned by frequent Ken Loach collaborator Paul Laverty.

The Olive Tree is a powerful parable, which uses these characters as a window into the devastation caused by 8 years of the excruciating recession caused by the 2008 financial crisis. The symbolism and subtle commentary incorporated into the story is an extremely rewarding thing to dissect and unpack. There is something that resonates deeply in the parallels between how Alma executes her mission, lying, without a plan, without much money, "borrowing" a truck worth half a million that is way beyond her financial means and setting off with her uncle (Javier Gutiérrez) and his colleague to Germany. An allegory that draws striking similarities with the reckless attitude that caused the financial crash in the first place.

All the poetic imagery and hidden messages that are buried deep within the olive tree would be wasted without a story and characters fully developed in their own right to allow it to flourish. Thankfully, *The Olive Tree* has this in abundance. Alma is, fierce, powerful, fragile and self-destructive. She is a compelling and complicated character whose motivations seem both noble and completely inconsiderate in equal measure. Following a protagonist whose quest produces such mixed emotions in the audience is a joy to watch and I much prefer



following flawed characters on a journey rather than paragons of virtue, so it was a most welcomed approach. Javier Gutiérrez as Alma's uncle Alcachofa was also a multi-layered character who was a joy to behold; Gutiérrez treads the line between tragedy and comedy beautifully and it is his performance in many ways that is the emotional heart of the story. His interactions with Alma during the trip to recover the olive tree are simply road movie

dynamics at its very best. The characters within the story, no matter how limited their screen time, also leave an impactful impression and add to the story in meaningful ways. My only exception to that statement is a storyline involving German law students which slightly broke up the pacing on the road trip and felt like unneeded exposition at times.

The Olive Tree is a profound heartfelt story penned by one of the best character writers there is, Paul Laverty. It is filled with sincere subtext and an undercurrent of meaningful discourse that makes this film work on a multitude of levels

Andy Furlong **Hey U guys**

Icía Bollain's family drama - written by her partner Paul Laverty - plays out like a mainstream cousin of Asier Altuna's Amama: When A Tree Falls, touching on similar ideas of the importance of family life, community and man's connection to the land in Spain. These more country-specific issues are married to global concerns about the environment and corporatization in general.

Alma (Anna Castillo, who deservedly won a best newcomer Goya for her role) is the youngest member of her family's farming clan, spending her working hours looking after the barn-farmed chickens. When not at work, she likes to hang out, as she always has, with her grandfather (non-pro Manuel Cucala, adding an earthy authenticity). Once the sort of vibrant granddad everyone

dreams of - showing her how to graft olive trees and encouraging her love of the 'monster' face in the family's 2,000-year-old specimen - he has now been reduced to silence by Alzheimer's.

Alma believes he is partially grieving for the ancient tree, which was sold by her dad (Miguel Angel Aladren, channelling Sam Waterston) against his father's wishes, with the spot now marked by a cairn of stones that her granddad adds to occasionally. His granddaughter, whose impetuosity is drawn in broad brushstrokes that Castillo's performance helps to smooth over, decides to track down the tree. To her dismay, she discovers it is 'in captivity', gracing the foyer of a German energy company in Dusseldorf.

Hatching a threadbare plot to bring it home she invents a pretext to persuade her good-natured uncle Arti (Javier Gutiérrez, on fine comedy form) and doe-eyed colleague Rafa (Pep Ambrós) to make a road trip with her to fetch it, as she desperately attempts to whip up a social media campaign as they go.

Bollaín and Laverty have tackled social issues before, in [Even The Rain](#) and *Kathmandu Lullaby*, but this film benefits from being more character based and less polemical. Bollaín quickly establishes the quiet of the old - symbolised by the olive groves where Ramon sits - and the chaos of the new seen in the rowdy chicken barn. Flashbacks are used judiciously and organically, all gently supported by the flowing, piano-driven score by Pascal Gaigne.

The backdrop to the story also hints at the economic crisis in general, as well as the corruption of officials, that has left many in Spain's rural areas struggling to find employment. Germany doesn't escape uncriticised either, with nods the idea of the country somehow stealing jobs and the young generation from Spain apparent in Rafa's suggestion he might just "stay there".

Some of the symbolism on the trio's journey is on the hefty side - particularly a garish Statue of Liberty which ends up coming along for the ride - and Alma's tendency towards self-harm feels more of a device than an integrated part of her character. But what the film lacks in allegorical subtlety it makes up for in depth of emotion. The sight of the tree in such an alien environment is powerful but it's the film's smaller moments of solidarity that make the most impact, such as an almost imperceptible snatch of song or a sudden outburst of shared laughter over a sandwich. This is a charmingly hopeful film that has faith in the younger generation and in nature's ability to find a route - and, indeed, root - to survival.

Amber Wilkinson **Eye for Film**

