

The Olive Tree [15] 2016 | Spain/Germany | 100 min

UK release date **14th March 2017**

Director **Icíar Bollain**

Screenplay **Paul Laverty**

Cinematographer **Sergi Gallardo**

Cast **Anna Castillo (Alma); Javier Gutierrez (Alcachofa); Pep Ambròs (Rafa)**

Much like its own lifespan, the olive tree as symbolic object can be traced back thousands of years. In Spanish director Icíar Bollain's latest feature, the titular tree is not only the ultimate peace offering in the midst of family conflict, but can potentially cure the sick, at least in the mind of protagonist Alma. When she crosses Europe with her uncle Alcachofa and secret admirer Rafa in a lorry to recover the family's olive tree, sold against her beloved grandfather's will, she does so convinced that knowing its destiny will help the latter recover from what's afflicting him, in her eyes 'mourning' but in reality Alzheimer's. The second of Bollain's collaborations with her partner Paul Laverty, Ken Loach's screenwriter, *The Olive Tree* is mainly concerned with family and its emotional and material legacies, as well as ideas around community and the transformation of rural life. With apparent simplicity, Bollain unfurls a small-scale but emotionally direct tale that hints at the silences and lies that undermine Alma's family.

Self-critical, insightful and warm, twentysomething Alma is another of Bollain's signature quixotic females who venture out impulsively on a personal quest. No-holds-barred in attitude, Alma will stop at nothing to recover the tree, and is ever ready to battle whichever giant windmills come her way. The giant in this case happens to be the German multinational that underpaid for Alma's family's ancient olive tree, its literal uprooting of this quintessentially Spanish symbol inevitably invoking the recent economic crisis, when the strong took advantage of the weak.

But far from idealising, Bollain's focus is on the specifics of this particular family tree. It's presented as something irreplaceable, but also linked to

longstanding family disputes that have been passed down from one generation to another; Alma and her grandfather refer to it as 'the monster'. And in just a few magical shots, the olive tree's roots reconfigure into the appearance of a monstrous face, which the narrative links to Alma's grandfather, a very different man from the person she knows. His monstrousness (and that of a world generally ruled by strict patriarchy) is hinted at in comments made by Alma's uncle: "You don't know how granddad really was, or how he treated your father". The latter is still clearly damaged by this relationship.

The film is a good deal less solemn than this makes it sound, and even if it loses some momentum in the final third, *The Olive Tree* manages to transmit a sincerity, humour and freshness throughout. When Alma's uncle Alcachofa seizes a replica of the Statue of Liberty from a client's swimming pool for an unpaid debt he's owed, Bollain's focus is not solely on the grotesque allegory of it being tied to the back of a lorry and ferried across a borderless Europe where drivers neither clap or insult it, but more on its being smashed to pieces in a back alley by Alcachofa himself; since it's not symbols and traditions in themselves but what you actually do with them that creates a genuine legacy.

After: Mar Diestro-Dópido, Sight and Sound, April 2017

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