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Sergio Tréfaut: Alentejo, Alentejo

Skrevet den 05-08-2014 16:08:41 af Tue Steen Müller

An old man stands at his kitchen sink. He is being addressed by his daughter. *Cut.* He sits down at a table, cleans his glasses, puts them on, takes a piece of paper, looks into the camera, looks at us and starts reading from



the paper(s). I wrote a poem, he says, about "cante", about how it came into existence. He reads the lines about the Alentejo people being mute, but listening to the voices of birds and cicades, they got inspired to express *Life* through singing. Words were scarce, carefully treated. "Cante" was born. The old man smiles, he has given his interpretation with humour and pride of being part of the Alentejo community, a region that although abandoned and far away from Lisbon, a region with unemployment and poverty, has its own rich culture and history that is being nurtured not only by the old generation but also by the youngsters and the kids in schools.

In this –to warn you: I will not be short of praising adjectives in this review – wonderful emotional journey into the history of "cante", its roots, its connection to the farming and cooking culture (you see how a bread soup is made, and how bread is baked and red wine is enjoyed) you are invited to enjoy the "cante" singing by primarily male choirs constituted by Men with furrowed faces and well-fed stomachs, who make the most beautiful performances. You may close your eyes and enjoy, but it would be wrong as the camera catches superbly the faces and the English subtitles, as good as subtitles can be, give you the content of the songs.

What you discover is that the texts are *story* - telling themselves. Love songs from the countryside, in the beginning a tribute song to

Mother, a song about Death, powerful and sad, about the eternal crisis of Alentejo, and the crisis of today, and the longing to come back to Home, when you have left the culture and its deeply rooted "cante".

Crisis of today: the film also lets children in a classroom tell their teacher that the parents work abroad, there is nothing for them here. The film ends on a song that includes lyrics like "abandoned" and "always been forgotten" and in this way the film is also a political message to the authorities of a Portugal in Lisbon and Porto, the big

cities.

The cinematography – the dop is Joao Ribeiro – is unique. The singing with the choirs takes place on a black background or in taverns where the singers and the moments where the individuals come into the song are perfectly (= naturally) arranged. Look at the still accompanying this review, of course it is the man to the furthest left, who is the lead singer, whereafter others take over in the a capella performance. The light is set right in this scene from a tavern as many others from similar locations, complemented by the set-ups where you have the choir out-of-location and in the dresses they use for performance. Ribeiro demonstrates a fantastic eye for composition. When you have a person talking to the camera, like the old woman in the beginning of the film, who tells fascinatingly about her childhood, the framing is done through lot of stories told "around" the woman at the table. Or when you have an old man, also in the beginning, who remembers songs, is emotionally affected and sings one song, waits some moments – the camera stays on him – and sings one more... it is magnificently conveyed.

And thanks for letting the scenes unfold, for being slow = respectful, for letting the characters express themselves!

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There is a song "to every situation" says a young man, who studies "cante", and you feel happy when you hear and see three young men in a kitchen where they make the bread soup, eats a bit, salutes each other with a glass of wine and start to sing, and afterwards talk about "cante". It's not about understanding, it's about "feeling the lyrics". He says.

I have followed Sergio Tréfaut's documentary work for many years. I saw his Portuguese revolution film "Outro Pais" (1999), his warm film with his mother "Fleurette" (2002), his "Lisboners" (2005), the Egypt work "City of the Dead". They are all good, however, the new "Alentejo, Alentejo" seems to me to be the most mature and rich informational and emotional documentary from his hands.

Portugal, 2014, 97 mins.

<http://alentejoalentejo.com/en/>

<http://www.sergiotrefaut.com/alentejo/>

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