

Alentejo, Alentejo: Lisbon Review

12:12 PM PDT 5/13/2014 by Neil Young



Screengrab

The Bottom Line

Warm tribute to the power of communal song strikes some duly rousing notes.

Venue

IndieLisboa film festival (Observatory), Lisbon, Portugal; May 4 2014.

Director

Sergio Trefaut

Experienced documentarian Sergio Trefaut's study of traditional music was named best Portuguese feature-length film at the Lisbon festival.

There's much more to Portuguese song than the world-renowned urban, solo lamentations of Fado, as shown by **Sergio Trefaut's** *Alentejo, Alentejo*. A leisurely celebration of the polyphonic, rural, traditional song-form known as *cante Alentejano*--or 'cante' for short--it won the prize for the best new Portuguese feature-length film when world-premiering at the country's leading festival, Indielisboa, and has crowdpleasing prospects for further festival exposure. The theatrical cut runs 100 minutes, with a trim 58-minute version available for small-screen slots.

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<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/welcome-new-york-cannes-review-702669>

Trefaut and his editor **Pedro Marques** include no fewer than 26 examples of cante (pronounced 'can-teh') performed--without musical accompaniment--by ten different choirs, most of them from the eponymous Alentejo area in the country's south. Many of the songs, which are with only a couple of exceptions presented in full, deal with the landscape, history and hardships of this agricultural district. "Sacred land of bread... the golden fields and the immense loneliness" goes one; "such an abandoned land--for the good of the nation it should be cultivated... It has always been forgotten, so many people unemployed--such an abandoned land" moans another. Trefaut avoids captions or narration, largely proceeding in time-honored fly-on-the-wall style.

While the subject-matter of the anthems is often downbeat, even grim, there's a palpable sense of joy in the way they're

performed--choirs may be comprised of males or females (usually the former), but never both together--and captured in simple but striking indoor and outdoor settings. This is a rousing (if occasionally repetitive) paean to solidarity and communal activity, especially vital in times of economic strife. The nation's current plight is referenced in one particularly topical number ("Portugal is in crisis now... Factories are closing down") which confirms that the film itself is no mere elegiac compendium of folklore, and also that *cante* isn't just a picturesque exercise in quaint atavism.

The song-form may have experienced spells in and out of fashion (one speaker recalls a recent period "when *cante* was kitsch"), but Trefaut is careful to establish--especially in his film's final third--that it exerts considerable appeal to the country's younger generations. In an (over-)extended sequence of interviews with schoolchildren, we spot that their pencil-cases and bags are with few exceptions examples of *Spider-Man* memorabilia: a subtle indication of the commercial forces imperiling older, more homegrown cultural remnants.

But while youth is amply present, it's the more senior citizens who irresistibly dominate proceedings; their weathered and experience-etched faces amplify the effect of their soulful, resonant vocalizations. *Cante* involves two soloists (singing in slightly different keys) and a chorus of up to 30: the effect of the latter in full voice never fails to impress and often raises neck-hairs. Much credit must go to Trefaut's sound-recording team--**Miguel Moraes Cabral, Olivier Blanc, Armanda Carvalho**--for delivering audio of appropriately bell-like clarity, and which will surely lend itself to a potentially lucrative soundtrack CD.

Venue: IndieLisboa, Lisbon, Portugal (section), May 4 2014

Production company: Faux

Director / Screenwriter / Producer: Sergio Trefaut

Director of photography: Joao Ribeiro

Editor: Pedro Marques

Sales: Faux, Lisbon

No MPAA rating, 100 minutes