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## Love and Death



*El Amor Brujo*

*The Sacrifice*

### *El Amor Brujo*

Adapted and Directed by Carlos Saura  
Produced by Emiliano Piedra  
Choreography by Saura and Antonio Gades  
With Antonio Gades, Christina Hoyos, Laura del Sol, and Juan Antonio Jimenez

### *The Sacrifice*

Written and directed by Andrei Tarkovsky  
Produced by Anna-Lena Wiborn, Swedish Film Institute  
With Erland Josephson, Susan Fleetwood, and Tommy Kjellquist

### By Henry Sheehan

The difference between Carlos Saura and Andrei Tarkovsky is the difference between a devotee and a zealot. Saura has dance fever; *El Amor Brujo* is his third (and apparently final) collaboration with dancer/choreographer Antonio Gades and the members of his troupe. Like the first two (*Blood Wedding* and *Carmen*), it is a flamenco ballet of murderous love, a spectacular meant to arouse both the mind and the senses. Tarkovsky's latest, *The Sacrifice*, seems, at first sight, unable to excite at all. A long drawn-out portrayal of visionary anguish, the film seems intentionally obscure and puzzling. Watching it is somewhat akin to attending a Russian

Orthodox religious service for the first time, an exercise whose exoticism is soon outstripped by its abstruse ritual. Yet, Saura's film, for all its many surface pleasures, is the one caught up in ungainly artsiness, a filmmaker's efforts to somehow impose, by any means, his signature on his work. While *The Sacrifice*, for all its apparent stylistic skulduggery, is the clearest expression possible of Tarkovsky's obsessive fascination with the presence of God in the world.

On the other hand, if there's anything to be said for the presence of lust and jealousy in the world, Saura and his company of dancers say it in *El Amor Brujo*. Set in a contemporary Gypsy camp pitched in the junky exurbia around Madrid, the movie weaves a tale of fateful liaisons that bind lovers even beyond death. Candela (Christine Hoyos, who played the lead in *Blood Wedding* and herself in *Carmen*) has been betrothed to Jose (Juan Antonio Jimenez) since both were children. Yet, on the day of their wedding, as Candela, at Jose's insistence, dances with Carmelo (Gades), who has long loved her ardently and silently, Jose slips off to flirt with hot, young Lucia (Laura del Sol, who played the title role in *Carmen*). Candela, loyal to a fault, becomes a female cuckold, till the day that Jose, embroiled in a gang knife fight sparked by his love-making to Lucia, is stabbed to death. The innocent Carmelo takes the rap in order to protect the other members of

his Gypsy clan, happy to pay any kind of price for the freedom to approach Candela as an honest lover.

In dances created by Gades, the performers march, strut, and glide across the screen to the music of Manuel de Falla (1876-1946). Alternately symphonic and folkish, the score creates a mounting tonal litany of desire; the dancers don't seem to move to it so much as they are moved by it. Together, they stir toward the moment of incapacitating fantasy when Candela is visited by the spirit of Jose, an event that becomes a nightly occurrence, and locks her and Carmelo—and eventually, Lucia, too—into a struggle for life.

The story has the power of a folk tale, yet Saura doesn't seem to have much faith in it. The entire proceedings are caught in a tortuously contrived style that intrudes with blatant notes of fakery at every turn. The film's very opening introduces this artificiality. As the overture sounds, Saura, with a bravura tracking crane shot, shows us a descending sound-stage door, banks of lights and filters, scaffolding and painted canvas backdrops, before moving down onto the assembled, motionless cast, who then begin the action.

If Saura is trying to mimic that moment in the theater when the audience waiting for the curtain to arise, begins their passage from the world of nature to the world of contrivance or art, he has fatally blundered. From that moment on,

every possibility of spontaneous emotional combustion is extinguished by debilitating abstraction. For example, during a scene of the encampment's women hanging out their laundry to dry, the dialogue builds to a comic ribaldry of warbled gossip about sex. However, the space is so carefully, purposely broken up by the laundry lines, and the hanging clothes themselves are so deliberately placed with regard to the symmetry of color—and Saura shoots the scene to draw attention to all this—that all that's left is a bland appreciation of craft. And, when the scene ends with Candela alone as a wind whips up the clothes and she enters her trance-like state of ardor, you're more likely to think of the offstage wind machine than of Candela's libido. Saura turns his film into an appreciation for flamenco dancing, and the whole story of love and death becomes nothing but a convenience, a vehicle for the empty display.

Andrei Tarkovsky is not a director that could ever get caught up in mere love of craft. In an early scene in *The Sacrifice* the main character, Alexander (Erland Josephson), a critic and professor, is given a book of reproductions of murals of the Cathedral of the Mirozhsk Monastery at Pskov in Russia. Like the medieval creators of those works, Tarkovsky uses his art in the service of his theology. In an age when filmmakers try to trace spiritual transcendence without a corresponding belief in God—and Saura's ectoplasmic effusions are a good example—Tarkovsky stands as a dour scout of God's immanence.

*The Sacrifice* is the story of a conversion, from materialist condescension to spiritual abasement. Alexander has a typically worldly attitude towards manifestations of the divine. The film opens with Alexander and his son planting a tree on a coastline, as the older man relates a story of monkish devotion. The academic's appreciation is limited to the anthropological at best; he has no desire for his son to take his quaint tale literally. But that afternoon is the last moment that Alexander is able to abide in a comfortable world of demonstrable propositions. It is his birthday, both literally and religiously.

After an evening of celebration with family and friends, Alexander goes to his son's bedroom to look in on his child, a patient temporarily muted by a throat operation. As Alexander gazes upon his speechless offspring and looks at a model the child has built of his father's treasured rustic hideaway, Tarkovsky drains the scene of color. The rest of the main body of the film, which has the quality of a nightmarish vision, takes place in hues of gray that, paradoxically, gives a tactile, shapely reality to things that they don't have in color. Going back downstairs, Alexander finds his friends gathered around a TV set listening to a political leader give notice of the start of nuclear war.

Throughout the rest of the night, Alexander and his companions undergo a series of confrontations with their own fears and faults. However, it is done in a far from melodramatic style. Tarkovsky shoots the action with a stately, distanced camera that allows the character's tantrums to linger on beyond the usual dramatic cutoffs. Likewise, Tarkovsky insists on an acting style that abjures naturalism in favor of a more florid style. The result is that the film admits the possibilities of meanings beyond those immediately at hand. The director's camera depicts a landscape shared equally between the characters and nature and underlines the contrast between creation and man's possessions. Likewise, the overscaled acting suggests the likelihood of larger problems possessing performers.

*The Sacrifice* has the quality of a ritual performed before strangers. Every act

seems to hold a meaning beyond its obvious application, though that meaning is not always completely clear. Yet, in spite of the deliberate opacity, the film's conclusion is profoundly moving, even

for a confirmed atheist. Burned by the fright of the night before—which, complete with imminent nuclear holocaust, appears to have been illusory—Alexander has become possessed by an other-

worldly madness which compels him to a silent, histrionic act. The material world has melded with his spiritual state, and the whole landscape becomes vivified by belief.

Tarkovsky reduces his climax to a self-conscious mannerism, which reaches his. But at least Tarkovsky was trying to photograph God; Saura just wanted to stage a dance. 9