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FILM

By Tom Allen

HOW TASTY WAS MY LITTLE FRENCHMAN. Directed and written by Nelson Pereira Dos Santos. Produced by Dos Santos and Luis Carlos Barreto. Released by New Yorker Films.

It strikes me that the emotional landscape of Brazilian director Nelson Pereira Dos Santos will always be more exotic than any of the alien locales he portrays on screen. His is a cinema of itchy, arbitrary camera movement, of a sunny primitivism attracted to bizarre, folklorish tales, and of a huge appetite for heavy irony. It is a cinema of preconceptions that instinctually predates today's new wave from West Berlin.

How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman, with its all-or-nothing punchline title, deals with an encounter between Europeans and Indians in 16th-century South America. When Werner Herzog covered a similar route in *Aguirre, The Wrath of God*, he invested each character with a fierce ideological identity and each camera movement with an expressive payoff. Dos Santos, however, is more comfortable with stoic amateurs in key roles and with a narrative line and visual style most kindly described as anarchic.

I don't relate well to either form of filmmaking, but while the Germans tends to oppress, Dos Santos tends to release. His 1978 festival film *Tent of Miracles*, for instance, generously shared the complex Bahia culture in Brazil. And *How Tasty*, made in 1971, can be looked upon as a perversely innocent fable. It's a great conversation piece. About three-dozen actors covered with reddish urucum juice run around starkers with three-dozen women outfitted in G-strings—not the relatively modest variety on strippers, but the type you find on guitars. The anthropological ambience is doubtful, seemingly more fairy tale than fact; the movie's development is erratic; and its conclusion is foregone. But there's a certain childish glee about it, as well as the imprint of one of the most outlandish filmmaking personalities of the Third World. You can take a peek this weekend at the Public Theater without fear of descending to voyeurism. ■