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COS AELENEI

~ ALEXANDRA MARIA LARA IN ONE OF HER LOVELIEST INCARNATIONS ~

Wild 'Youth'

Coppola's Romanian rhapsody is wacky but somehow absorbing

~ BY ANDY KLEIN ~

FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA IS almost universally acknowledged as one of the greatest American directors to emerge in the '70s ... and the "competition" includes the likes of Martin Scorsese, Woody Allen, Robert Altman, Steven Spielberg, and (insert your favorite here). Still, the one-two-three-four punch of *The Godfather*, *The Conversation*, *The Godfather: Part II*, and *Apocalypse Now* is a hard run to beat.

His '80s and '90s work was much more variable: Ambitious experiments like *One from the Heart* and *Rumble Fish* went cheek to cheek with pleasant commercial endeavors (*Peggy Sue Got Married*), less pleasant commercial endeavors (*Jack*), and at least one outright dog (*Gardens of Stone*). For a period he seemed to be more absorbed with his vineyard than his filmmaking.

But now he's back with his first feature since *The Rainmaker* 10 years ago — *Youth Without Youth*, a strange cross-genre film with art house pretensions. It's baffling and disjointed, and I don't mean that in an altogether negative way.

Tim Roth plays Dominic Matei, a 70-year-old Romanian linguistics professor circa 1938, who realizes that he will never finish his validating life's work on the origins of language and consciousness. Just as he is about to commit suicide, he is struck by lightning ... literally. He is horribly burned and would seem an unlikely candidate for survival, but just the opposite proves true. Not only does he survive, but his age regresses; he is now physically no older than 40. Just as weirdly, he begins to converse with an illusory doppelgänger, who pushes him to finish his research, regardless of cost.

The experience also sharpens his intellectual capacities to supernatural levels, and he even develops some sort of ESP. Unfortunately, these miracles make him of interest to the Nazis, so soon he is fleeing across Europe under an assumed name. After the war, he meets Veronica (Alexandra Maria Lara), who looks exactly like his one great love (from 50 years earlier) and who intermittently talks exactly like a Buddhist scribe from twelve hundred years earlier. Veronica starts a series of past-life regressions that provide the link Dominic needs for his work; but

they also take a horrible toll.

If this all sounds kind of wacky, well, yes, it is. The film is adapted from a novella by spiritual/mystic/philosopher/linguist/academic Mircea Eliade; the official credit, "based upon the writing of," suggests that other works were interpolated. Reading even an outline of Eliade's ideas can generate vertigo; like Dominic, he seems to speak in a private, self-invented language. The words *sound* like English, without the meanings corresponding.

The ideas that underlie the film are both cosmic enough and abstract enough as to suggest utter bullshit — not unlike those in Darren Aronofsky's *The Fountain* — but *Youth Without Youth* is buoyed by the contrast between its artsy style and its many genre elements. Dominic's transformation is right out of D.C. Comics, and his life is a spy novel, crossed with science fiction and supernatural romance. (Dominic notices this himself, at one point saying, "I am a mutant ... like a character in a science fiction novel.") The plot has intersections with *Dracula* (which Coppola also filmed), *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, some old *Twilight Zone* episodes, *The Mummy*, and a raft of other grotesque works.

But the lovely visuals are altogether in keeping with the European art house style Coppola used in *The Godfather* and *Bram Stoker's Dracula*. Much of the movie has an aged, burnished look. And — although it may have been the film's relatively low budget that led to the extensive use of postproduction dubbing — the resulting sound only enhances the "foreign film" feel.

Youth Without Youth is its own kind of aesthetic mutant, but it's the sort of film whose weakest points only make it more interesting. ★

Youth Without Youth. Written, produced, and directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Based upon the writing of Mircea Eliade. With Tim Roth, Alexandra Maria Lara, Bruno Ganz, Marcel Iures, and Alexandra Pirici. At selected theaters.