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# Dance With a Stranger

BY J. HOBERMAN

**Tutti Frutti:** In *Mammame* (left) the oddball mixes with pop pizzazz. **Not a lemon** (below): It's Raul Ruiz's decade.



FRENCH INSTITUTE/ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE

**MAMMAME.** Directed by Raul Ruiz. Choreographed by Jean-Claude Gallotta. At the Film Forum 2, January 29 and 30.

Now that the Film Forum has opened two Raul Ruiz films in a single month, it may be that 1988 will be the year one no longer needs to explain just who the double-hey huh? is this dude with the B-movie monicker—e.g., the Godard of the '80s, Mister early-Borges-plus-middle-period-Welles, a Barthesian Buñuel, the Edgar G. Ulmer of the European art film, a Third World H. Rider Haggard, the García Márquez of French TV, and so forth.

Ruiz is Ruiz, not that he poses much threat to more genteel foreigners of the Scola-Tavernier-Paul Cox axis. His aesthetic is anti-*Masterpiece Theatre* in more ways than one—his baroque cheapsters don't lend themselves to easy synopses, plush environs, or individual canonization. The extraordinarily prolific Ruiz is oriented more toward process than product. But, although the just departed *Life Is a Dream* is near quintessential (an oblique, prolix, madderly self-intoxicated mixture of political satire and narrative shapeshifting), the 65-minute *Mammame*—playing Friday and Saturday with Charles Atlas's short *From an Island Summer* as part of the Film Forum 2's "Dance on Film" series—is in some respects the most accessible example of recent Ruiz-ania, eschewing lan-

guage to "document" a piece by French choreographer Jean-Claude Gallotta.

A lion in Europe, the 37-year-old Gallotta pretty much bombed in the one instance his company played New York (around the time Ruiz's *Three Crowns of the Sailor* materialized at our local film festival). Perhaps his work is too overtly theatrical or ostentatiously meaningful for indigenous tastes: If nothing else, *Mammame* is a dance of substance, a threeway taffy-pull between libido, tenderness, and social ritual. The tormented affairs of men and women are enacted by four couples in unisex gray gym shorts and matching tank tops. (Gallotta plays the odd man out, wearing a puzzled look and a white undershirt.) The mode is severe ambivalence and the institutional flavor of the costumes is further accentuated by the somber squash-court set—a sci-fi sweatsock ambience described by fanciful Ruiz as somewhere midway between a sheik's tent and "the ballroom of a submarine." The mood suggests George Lucas's dour *THX 1138* enacted by a troupe of muttering Martians and redesigned by Toni Basil for pop pizzazz.

Ruiz leaves the content to Gallotta but, never one to mask his expressionism or pass up an opportunity for garish illusion-conjuring, he characteristically composes the frame to have a gigantic side-long head dominating the foreground, a tiny cluster of dancers glimpsed over its exposed ear, stations his camera on the floor to lure the dancers into El Greco



elongations, and makes canny use of extreme overhead angles to destroy, or rather displace, our sense of gravity. *Mammame* opens with a succession of dancers leaping over the camera as though the lens were a jump and the stage a steeplechase and, having effectively placed the audience belly up on the stage floor, never looks back. The camera is as apt to muse upon a single sinewy elbow or a muscular pair of thighs thrashing apart at 90 degrees as it is upon the entire ensemble of dancers. Not that the movie is overly visceral. Fabulist that he is, Ruiz lights the stage so that the shadows of the dancers become at least as important as the corporeal bodies for which they frequently stand in.

Set to an effective pastiche of tolling electronic drone, light classical music, and ersatz Satie, not to mention the continual whispered babbling of the overex-

tended performers, Gallotta's choreography is no less eccentric than Ruiz's mis-en-scène. As though steeped in the values of some advanced, disheveled civilization, it's an amalgam of mechanical Punch-and-Judy gestures, academic ballet poses, and ungraceful entanglements in which disciplined formations dissolve into miscellaneous acts of pairing, or the stomp and jabber of a mock baboon fight abruptly gives way to a dreamy series of hop-skip flamenco moves.

If *Mammame* is impossible to imagine onstage (and not just because the camera so readily obliterates the theatrical single-point perspective) it gives some insight into Ruiz's working methods. According to Gallotta, the director used a fixed-camera videotape of the piece for his script and then faithfully reproduced it, in his fashion. Although pulverizing the action, Ruiz shot *Mammame* in painstakingly chronological order—

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throughout, the filmmaker prefers drastically changing the set-up to simply moving the camera. While less explosive than such kindred exercises in kinetic compression as Maya Deren's *A Study in Choreography for Camera* or the central ballet sequence in Michael Powell's *The Red Shoes*, *Mammame* is actually more spatially violent. From a middle shot of the dancers milling, Ruiz typically cuts to a close-up in their midst and then back to the initial set-up without missing a beat. As much as *Mammame* calls attention to itself as a montage, it remains mysteriously fluid.

Like *Life Is a Dream*, if to less gory effect, *Mammame* ultimately leaves the temple of art for a seaside coda, set against a backbeat of implicit discomfort (wind, cold, squawking gulls). Gallotta's dancers cavort in the livid filter-induced sunset, then sit down for an open-air repast—their rhythmic turning away from and twitching back to a table incongruously heaped with lemons providing an appropriately oddball finale. (There's a disco tempo as the fruit rolls off onto the ground.) One of the more heartening developments in French culture has to be Ruiz's appointment as director of the Maison de la Culture in Havre (Gallotta evidently occupies the same position in Grenoble); in the best of all worlds, some Washington honcho would get him a grant to direct the PBS telecast of this weekend's Super Bowl. ■

For another view of *Mammame*, see Burt Supree's dance review, page 90.