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The Olive Tree (Cert 15)
dir: Icíar Bollaín

Starring: Anna Castillo, Javier Gutiérrez, Pep Ambròs

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Synopsis: Northern Spain, the present. Alma works at her family's chicken farm. Her beloved grandfather has not spoken since the family sold, against his will, the ancient olive tree that stood on their land 10 years previously. When he also stops eating, Alma decides that recovering the tree will make him feel better, even though she's been told he has Alzheimer's. She learns that the tree was acquired by a supposedly ecologically concerned multinational in Dusseldorf and is now displayed in the company's lobby and used as its logo. To recover it, she tells her uncle Alcachofa and her secret admirer Rafa a story about a pious German protestant who bought the tree but has since died - his parishioners now want to give it back to Alma's family. They drive her to pick up the tree. On their arrival, Rafa and Alcachofa discover that Alma has lied and are angry. They camp outside the company's offices and demand to speak to the CEO. A Facebook page is created to publicise Alma's quest and denounce the firm, leading to a demonstration in their lobby. The police arrive and Alma climbs the tree. Her uncle receives a phone call from home saying that the grandfather has died. The family reunites for the funeral. Alma plants a cutting from the tree that she has brought home with her

Much like its own lifespan, the olive tree as symbolic object can be traced back thousands of years. In Spanish director Icíar Bollaín's latest feature, the titular tree is not only the ultimate peace offering in the midst of family conflict, but can potentially cure the sick, at least in the mind of protagonist Alma. When she crosses Europe with her uncle Alcachofa and secret admirer Rafa in a lorry to recover the family's olive tree, sold against her beloved grandfather's will, she does so convinced that knowing its destiny will help the latter recover from what's afflicting him, in her eyes 'mourning' but in reality Alzheimer's. The second of Bollaín's collaborations with her partner Paul Laverty, Ken Loach's screenwriter, *The Olive Tree* is mainly concerned with family and its emotional and material legacies, as well as ideas around community and the transformation of rural life. With apparent simplicity, Bollaín unfurls a small-scale but emotionally direct tale that hints at the silences and lies that have undermined Alma's family.

Self-critical, insightful and warm, twentysomething Alma is another of Bollaín's signature quixotic females who venture out impulsively on a personal quest, just like the two effervescent young women who run away from home to get rich in the director's debut *Hola, ¿estas sola?* (1995), co-written with Julio Medem, and the abused heroine in *Take My Eyes* (2003). No-holds-barred in attitude, Alma will stop at nothing to recover the tree, and is ever ready to battle whichever giant windmills come her way. The giant in this case happens to be the German multinational that underpaid for Alma's family's ancient olive tree, its literal uprooting of this quintessentially Spanish symbol inevitably evoking the recent



economic crisis, where the strong took advantage of the weak.

But far from idealising, Bollaín's focus is on the specifics of this particular family tree. It's presented as something irreplaceable, but also linked to longstanding family disputes that have been passed down from one generation to another; Alma and her grandfather refer to it as 'the monster'. And in just a few magical shots, the olive tree's roots reconfigure into the appearance of a monstrous face, which the narrative links to Alma's grandfather, a very different man to the person she knows. His monstrosity (and that of a world ruled by strict patriarchy) is hinted at in comments made by Alma's uncle: "You don't know how granddad really was, nor how her treated your father." The latter is still clearly damaged by this relationship.

The film is a good deal less solemn than this makes it sound, and even if it loses some momentum in the final third - a David and Goliath battle between the multinational and the people - *The Olive Tree* still manages to transmit a sincerity, humour and freshness throughout. When Alma's uncle Alcachofa seizes a replica of the Statue of Liberty from a client's swimming pool for an unpaid debt he's owed, Bollaín's focus is not solely on the grotesque allegory of it being tied to the back of a lorry and ferried across a borderless Europe where drivers either clap or insult it, but more on its being smashed to pieces in a back alley by Alcachofa himself; since it's not symbols and traditions in themselves but what you actually do with them that creates a genuine legacy

Credits

Anna Castillo	Alma
Javier Gutierrez	Alcachofa ('Artichoke, Arti')
Pep Ambròs	Rafa
Manuel Cucala	Ramón
Miguel Angel Aladren	Luis
Carmen Pia	Vanessa
Ana Isabel Mena	Sole
Maria Romero	Wiki
Paula Usero	Adelie
Janina Agnes Schroder	Sophie
Cris Blanco	Estrella
Paco Manzanedo	Nelson

Credits (cont.)

Director	Icíar Bollain
Written by	Paul Laverty
Director of Photography	Sergi Gallardo
Editor	Nacho Ruiz Capillas
Art director	Laia Colet
Original music	Pascal Gaigne
Sound	Eva Valiño
Costume	Susa Sasserath

Spain 2016. 98 mins

Another view

A deceptively simple drama about a family and its thousand-year-old olive tree that is rooted in the best cinematic soil there is — emotional truth — *The Olive Tree* gets its hooks in early on, and then never lets up. Combining social crit with a deeply human story about the broken and unbroken bonds between generations, this yarn about a young Spanish woman's literal and spiritual quest to recover a symbolically significant olive tree from its new corporate owners is, like the best work of Bollain, co-scriptwriter Paul Laverty and their colleague and mentor Ken Loach, cinema that cares and wants to make the world better. In Spain at least, sadly it's an increasingly rare sub-genre.

The Olive Tree's raw human appeal has generated healthy pre-release sales across a range of territories, as well as recent festival play in Miami and Guadalajara: Word of mouth could see it blossom into extended international art house runs.

The family of impulsive Alba (Anna Castillo) has fallen on hard times, and they've been forced into abandoning olive oil production for poultry farming. On the personal side too, the tensions are running high: Bad business decisions have been made, Alba's uncle (Arti), embittered but kind-hearted, is unemployed and her grandfather (Manuel Cucala, a local man who has never acted before, and whose authenticity cannot quite be matched by the pros) wanders in hermetic silence around the lands in scenes visually redolent of Erice's masterpiece *The Spirit of the Beehive*, piling up stones where his and Alba's favorite olive tree used to stand, before being uprooted (in one of the films emotionally punchy flashbacks) and sold, the money going to set up a beach restaurant that has now gone bust, a victim of the financial crisis.

The magnificently gnarled tree, in the film's defining trope, has been sold to a German energy company that is now using it as their logo: It's a smart, sharp comment on our current moral crisis, in which marketing swiftly co-opts values.

"He's gone, Alba," her father (Miguel Angel Aladren) poignantly tells her with reference to her grandfather, but Alba is determined to bring him back. 'I know you're there,' she tells him, and promises to bring the tree back to Castellon. For the benefit of the locals she fakes a letter from a German pastor who has promised to return the tree, so it will simply be a case of borrowing a truck and driving to Dusseldorf to get it. She enlists the reluctant help of Arti and the not-so reluctant help of Rafa (Pep Ambròs), who has a crush on her, and off they go.

Communities are important to Bollain and Laverty, and they borrow to strong effect from Laverty and Loach the technique of mixing pros and locals in wryly comic group scenes, in this case centered on the local bar, which is full of unemployed men. But, the film reminds us, other, Internet-based communities are arising to replace them, and Alba's quest quickly becomes the focus of a social media protest campaign against the German energy company. There will be a catharsis for some Spaniards in all this, given the widespread feeling that it's the Germans who have assumed control of the

Spanish economy.

It is easy for films like this to wear their political hearts too obviously on their sleeves (and this was an issue with Bollain and Laverty's 2010 feature, *Even the Rain*), but the social crit here is not laid on forbiddingly thickly, filtered as it is through these engaging characters. Phrases often heard throughout Spain during the (ongoing) crisis pop up — 'the whole country has been deceiving itself', says Arti, which makes the film in part a commentary on that crisis and on their mass exile (an issue dealt with in Bollain's last film, the Spaniards-in-Scotland documentary *In a Foreign Land*).

Perhaps the only false note is the pompous fiberglass model of the Statute of Liberty, which Arti steals from the house of a wealthy man who owes him money and attaches to the back of the truck. Later, it too obviously becomes the symbolic target of Arti's working-man frustrations.

Flashbacks are used subtly and to potent emotional effect to establish the emotional bonds on which the film depends for its meaning, whether it's the child Alba putting makeup on her grandfather's face (this is also a film about the vast gulf, in a country which has changed so rapidly over the last 40 years, which separates the elderly from their grandchildren), or the 10-year old Alba defiantly climbing the ancient olive tree as the bulldozers move in (incidentally, and logically, no olive trees were harmed during the making of this movie).

The performances are uniformly strong, and therefore the all-important dynamics between the characters. Castillo is convincing as the healthily spiky Alba, a young woman guided by her emotions and a powerful sense of injustice, but this is equally a film about the recent injustices meted out to the working man, here represented by the tightly-wound Arti. Gutierrez, who delivered one of 2014's finest performances in the Alberto Rodriguez's multiple award-winning *Marshland*, is equally nuanced, bristling and committed here as the too-open-hearted Arti. He's also responsible for much of the film's sly, self-mocking humor.

Pascal Gaigne's gentle orchestral score, like the film as a whole, skillfully negotiates the tightrope between sentimentality and authentic emotion. Sergi Gallardo's widescreen photography is as unfussily effective in its documentary-style hand-held scenes as it is when it is soaring over the stunning ochre landscapes of eastern Spain.

Jonathan Holland, Hollywood Reporter

**Our next film: Friday November 10th, 7.30pm
After Love (France/Belgium 2016. Dir: Joachim Lafosse.
Cert 12a)**

Boris (Cédric Kahn) and Marie (Bérénice Bejo), have decided to separate after 15 years together. They have two girls that they adore. However, cash-strapped Boris is still living in the family home and this situation can only magnify their predicament.

Recalling Asghar Farhadi's magnificent film *A Separation*, in this intimate drama, Joachim Lafosse skilfully captures the emotional and financial complexities of the end of a long love story.