



CALIFORNIA DREAMIN' (ENDLESS)

Autumn
Season
2008

Director: Christian Nemescu, Romania (2007). Winner, Un Certain Regard Award Cannes; Satyajit Ray Award, London.

During the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, a bizarre stand-off over an American army train causes all manner of chaos in a quiet Romanian village. A contemporary epic East European satire on international relations.

Review by Saxon Bullock, Film 4:

As a result of tragic circumstances, the first film by writer-director Cristian Nemescu is also his last. Three months into post-production on *California Dreamin' (Endless)*, Nemescu and his editor Catalin Cristutiu were killed in a car crash - and where this would normally result in others stepping in to finish the film, an unusual step has been taken. As a mark of respect, the producers have left the film exactly as it was when Nemescu and his editor died (hence the added original subtitle of *Nasfarti*, Romanian for 'endless'), and they've released the film in what is essentially an unfinished but still highly impressive form.

Set during the sweltering summer of 1999, *California Dreamin'* follows a NATO train crewed by American soldiers and overseen by the gruff and no-nonsense Captain Jones (Assante). Carrying ultra-important radar equipment for use in the conflict in Yugoslavia, the train's mission is so vital and urgent, not all the paperwork has been completed, meaning serious problems when the train approaches the remote Romanian hamlet of Capalnita. Here, the railway manager Doiaru (Vasilescu) - a man who virtually runs the town thanks to his control of the black market - refuses to let the train through without receiving the relevant authorised forms, and the US soldiers find themselves stranded.

As the stand-off continues, various parties try to exploit the situation, from Capalnita's opportunistic mayor to a gang of striking workers from the local ball bearing factory and various local girls who like the idea of bedding a US soldier.

While the Romanian bureaucracy fails to come up with a solution and the Americans get more frustrated with their lot, a series of cultural misunderstandings unfolds. For much of the film, this is played with a blackly comic edge, but as the soldiers' presence continues, the darker tensions in the town become apparent and events head in a far more tragic direction. A loose, rambunctious tale that captures a blend of humour similar to director Emir Kusturica (*Black Cat, White Cat*), the film makes excellent use of a fine selection of Romanian acting talent and sketches out its characters with panache. Even Doiaru is shown to have hidden depths, especially when it comes to his personal reasons for disliking Americans, and the intelligent script gleefully rips into Romanian politics as well as the country's corruption and bureaucracy.

Shot in lengthy, prowling hand-held shots, it's a film that makes excellent use of comedy, but also gradually adds up the cruel ironies until the final act of the film unfolds with devastating force.

Along with the pot-shots at Romania, it's also a very pointed satire of American foreign policy, asking difficult questions about the US's habit of stirring up tensions and causing havoc without getting their hands dirty. From the hesitant romance between Doiaru's daughter Maria (Dinelescu) and one of the soldiers (a relationship that's just as much about her wanting to escape her father and the village) to the constant attempts by Captain Jones to take charge of the situation, it's a portrayal that's both comic and bleak. Elsewhere, the underrated Assante does fantastic work as Jones, simmering with ever-increasing annoyance throughout the film.

A well-structured and quirky art-house movie with a bitter heart behind its humour, *California Dreamin'* shows clearly that a promising filmmaker was lost when Nemescu died. Admittedly, it is difficult not to acknowledge that the sprawling nature of the story sometimes becomes a little overwhelming, and that chopping at least 10 minutes from the lengthy running time would have made it sharper and more focused. For what's essentially a 'rough cut', it's still an outstanding film and stands as one of the more distinctive and outspoken works of European cinema to emerge for some time.