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MOvie REVIEW

A Dream of a Lifetime, Fully Lived in Hours

‘Southwest,’ From Eduardo Nunes

Reguel Borfante in “Southwest,” part of the Museum of Modern Art’s Global Lens series.

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The rhythmic squeak of rotating blades on a windmill outside a rustic country inn; wind rushing through the grass; unsmiling characters viewed sidelong through half-open doors: These are among the repetitive aural and visual motifs in Eduardo Nunes’s “Southwest” that evoke the relentless passing of time and the weight of the world on people struggling to survive.

This Brazilian director’s debut feature, which opens on Thursday at the Museum of Modern Art as part of its Global Lens series, is set in an indeterminate past, perhaps the 19th century. An intensely poetic meditation on the life cycle with a magical-realist sensibility, it has the feel of a somber fairy tale whose narrative follows a circular path to end where it began. Like a Bela Tarr film it leads you to consider the breadth of eternity, the limits of human consciousness and the possibility of reincarnation.

The story begins with a scene of an old woman (Léa Garcia), who may or may not be a witch, being carried by a horse-drawn cart to an inn where a younger woman named Clarice has died while giving birth. The old woman immediately transports the baby to her home, a crude hut on stilts in the middle of a salt lake where fish are dying, and the desperate fishermen spend their days raking salt.
In the space of 24 hours the baby — also named Clarice — matures from an infant into a little girl (Raquel Bonfante), who escapes from the hut to the mainland via canoe with her beloved dog. She eventually metamorphoses into a beautiful young woman (Simone Spoladore) and in the final scenes withers into a crone who returns to the inn to await death.

Filmed in black and white with an unusually wide aspect ratio, “Southwest” is a visually beautiful film that demands that you surrender to its hypnotic images and accept a meditative pace determined by a camera that moves slowly and stealthily and is often turned toward the horizon.

There is a touching friendship at the heart of “Southwest.” Clarice’s childhood playmate, João (Victor Navega Motta), whose mother has lost a daughter also named Clarice, is the final image in her mind at the end of her life as she remembers them playing tag and speculating about the power of the imagination.

As a young woman Clarice is drawn to a man dressed as a witch doctor who leads a carnival parade. After they play a game of hide and seek, he pounces on her, and in the next scene she is pregnant. While anticipating childbirth, she falls into a swoon and awakens to discover to her distress that the child inside her has disappeared.

A lot in “Southwest” is unexplained and left for the viewer to ponder. In this movie of few words and indelible images, an invitation spoken in childhood and remembered in old age — “Close your eyes and listen to the sound of the rain” — resonates.

**Southwest**

*Opens on Thursday in Manhattan.*

Directed by Eduardo Nunes; written by Guilherme Sarmiento and Mr. Nunes; director of photography, Mauro Pinheiro Jr.; edited by Flávio Zettel; music by Cristiano de Abreu, Tiago Azevedo and Yuri Villar; produced by Helder Dacosta and Patrick Leblanc; released by the Global Film Initiative. At the Roy and Niuta Titus Theaters, Museum of Modern Art. In Portuguese, with English subtitles. Running time: 2 hours 8 minutes. This film is not rated.