

The death of mr lazarescu



Borne out of Puiu's own burgeoning hypochondria and the tragic events surrounding the death of one elderly man, *The Death of Mr Lazarescu* takes an unflinching look at society's disregard for the ailing and elderly.

Dante Remus Lazarescu lives in a small flat in the city of Bucharest his wife died ten years ago and since then his closest companions have been of the feline variety. A filthy dwelling old man, his appearance is the epitome of disregard; a lacklustre, solitary, existence is what spurs him into finding solace in the warm, enveloping arms of the local moonshine. The film's opening scene is that of Mr Lazarescu sitting in his miniscule kitchen; stomach pain has prompted him to call an ambulance and we see him relaying his symptoms to the operator in what quickly descends into a discussion about his fondness for a little tipple, an allusion to the long running condescension that mars the face of each individual he meets on his last night. The ambulance finally arrives and we are introduced to the backbone of the whole film: the paramedic Mioara (Luminita Gheorghiu).

With a quiet realism she manages to convey the slowly burgeoning emotional attachment she has to Lazarescu, this manifests itself little in her interactions with him personally, but more in her resolute efforts to afford him the treatment he so desperately needs. We learn of the seemingly mundane issues that litter her life; she wants her son to get married, she has a problem with her gall bladder, these unimportant titbits are what make her character all the more endearing. Luminita Gheorghiu, one of Europe's most respected theatre actresses, captures the detachment of an overworked, underappreciated, paramedic perfectly. The ephemeral interaction her character has with patients likely dictates how emotionally invested she

becomes, however, as time progresses and the concern for Lazarescu grows, we bear witness to a subtle shift in her demeanour.

Gheorghiu conveys the change deftly and without words, her facial expressions effortlessly displaying the depth of emotion. We learn that there has been a bus crash in the city, which is a precursor to how the last few hours of Mr Lazarescu's life will play out; he is bandied about from one hospital to the next, like a package that no one is willing to sign for. The first hospital they arrive at is typical, in that it is understaffed and attempting to deal with an all encompassing accident and from there he is sent on to a second hospital, only to find that starkly similar. If you are expecting ER, or even its slower paced cousin Casualty, you are likely to be disappointed, as the laissez-faire attitude of many of the doctors and nurses is less reminiscent of the usual fare of high octane medical dramas and is more akin to an ambulance ride-along documentary. The resemblance to a documentary could also be attributed to the fact that the film is shot almost entirely on handheld camera, a technique that in recent years has become somewhat of a cliché, but in this context it represents a realism that would be hard to replicate with static camera shots and artsy camera angles. The absence of non-diegetic sound is also cause for pause, at first this may seem aurally striking, but realisation soon hits and you realise that you are simply listening to real life.

At the third hospital, with an obvious languid approach to health care, the doctors and nurses appear more concerned with their status in the hierarchy of medical professionals, than they are about the well being of their patient. Mention the word panacea and they are likely to verbally lambaste you,

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inquiring as to the whereabouts of your medical degree. The paramedic Mioara is the target of such socially demoralising outbursts and we are indignant on her behalf when faced with the patronisingly youthful face of bureaucracy. The ever approaching knell nears and it is almost too easy to forget that the main protagonist, Mr Lazarescu has become little more than a prop as his level of consciousness becomes more and more debatable. It is at this point that Ion Fiscuteanu's evocative portrayal of Mr Lazarescu becomes all the more breathtaking; he has managed to transcend the line that separates the character from the actor, Ion Fiscuteanu no longer exists, he has become Mr Lazarescu and having devoted a large part of his life to the theatre, it is no wonder that Fiscuteanu is able to capture and command the attention of the audience with ease. The mirage like approach of the fourth hospital brings with it the pessimistic knowledge that time is slipping away from them; the dark hue of night has slowly given way to the hazy wakefulness of a new day and with despondence they enter into the rhythmically repetitive scenario that we have become so accustomed to.

The amateur approach to cinematography enables the situation to be viewed vicariously through the camera, the unblinking eyes of the audience; a silent omniscient presence throughout. The palette of colours appears harshly sterile; a bleak representation of weariness and isolation, but it also captures the darkly comedic undertones perfectly. This is where credit must be given to the cinematographer, Oleg Mutu, for achieving such clinical and gritty realism; through overbearing fluorescent lighting he draws on our own memories and experiences of hospitals and accentuates them to an

uncomfortable degree. The supporting characters are not without depth, strong personalities abound despite their brief appearances on screen.

An initial response to the seemingly repetitive narrative is perhaps a waning of the attention and with a running time of 153 minutes it is easy to see why, but it quickly becomes apparent that each new hospital, set of secondary characters and personalities is a deluge of nuance, peppered with truncated interpersonal relationships that loosely function as a narrative within a narrative. The matter of fact approach often becomes uncomfortably intimate; when decency dictates that we look away, the subtly overwhelming emotions that are elicited by the scene almost forbid you from doing so. We are all too present as Lazarescu soils himself just as he is about to undergo a CT scan and despite the lack of coherence in his utterances he is still able to convey his needs; these simplistic observations about the fragility of the human body will leave us quietly pondering our own humanity. Puiu has attended to every detail with the eye of a painter, each stroke of the brush establishing some almost irrelevant, yet immaculately befitting details. Dante Remus Lazarescu's names are no mistake, for they encapsulate the very essence of the character's meandering journey through his own personal hell.

Though Puiu may have underpinned the narrative with some loosely veiled sarcasm, in what is likely to be a critical voice aimed at the Romanian health care system, it is however, the stark honesty of the human existence that resonates in such a depressingly accurate way; everyone's life is merely the scenic route to death.