

Movie Review: 'Youth Without Youth'

by David_Elliott

It's rare for an old master to be young again. Orson Welles did with "F for Fake," and now, with a similar dance of invention, Francis Ford Coppola in "Youth Without Youth."

'YOUTH WITHOUT YOUTH' - Dominic Matei (Tim Roth) finds that youth, even if middle-aged, sure beats dying in Francis Ford Coppola's bold, dreamy 'Youth Without Youth.' CNS Photo courtesy of Cos Aelenei/Sony Pictures Classics. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Coppola is 68, and his last directed feature ("The Rainmaker") was a decade ago and tired. A leap like "Youth" is only possible for a veteran who found true rejuvenation, and Coppola goes for broke as he hasn't since the 1980s.

In adopting "Youth" from a story by the Romanian cultural philosopher Mircea Eliade, Coppola achieves a unique merger of his expansive talent, Eliade's big-deal ideas and, as guardian angels, Welles, Jean Cocteau

and Jorge Luis Borges.

Tim Roth stars as Dominic Matei, who in 1938 is 70 and reaching the end without completing his big book on the roots of language. Instead of lightning in a bottle, he is hit by lightning on the street. Though cooked almost to death, he slowly awakens in a Bucharest hospital.

The film piles up in three phases, and tones. In the first, with the nostalgic gaze of old books and 1930s Romania, Matei is attended by a sage doctor (Bruno Ganz) who is astounded by his revival. After spitting out his teeth, Matei grows new ones, and soon he is back in his vital middle years, brain humming, his memory finer than Proust's.

He is "the most valuable human specimen existing on the face of the Earth," but the Nazis squeeze Romania and a sort of Nazi Dr. Frankenstein acted by Andre Hennicke seeks to suborn Matei. He slips off to Switzerland with much shadowy, darting intrigue; Mihai Malaimare Jr.'s succulent cinematography rivals even Gordon Willis' on the "Godfather" saga.

This second story phase verges on camp, with stiff Nazis and a femme fatale who dies meltingly: "You were the honey in my dreams. Forgive me." But it isn't mummified like parts of "Cotton Club" and "Tucker," and it whips up a suspense souffle with the exotic exuberance of Welles' "Journey Into Fear" and "Mr. Arkadin."

After the war, Matei meets lovely Veronica (Alexandra Maria Lara), who resembles the long-gone love of his first youth. She's the one for his second, but also channels an ancient seeker who babbles Sanskrit (Matei comprehends, of course). As their romance plays out in India, then Malta, a good many viewers may feel taxed, as if "The Razor's Edge" has found its way to "Star Trek."

The tax is worth paying. Coppola has conviction even with the airiest elements. The churn and sweep of time, memory, karma, the whole enchilada of fate, give the story a weirdly compulsive charm. Lara is a special beauty who suffers well, and if Roth is not a sunburst of star charisma, he's an actor who floods his

work with intelligence and belief.

This is his best on film since Altman's "Vincent & Theo." As for Coppola, maybe he got hit by lightning, or stayed on some special vintage from his Napa winery. We can stop thinking his talent is past.

Some won't like the film, which is their sad loss. Coppola experiments with storytelling in a succulent, commanding way. He seems so youthfully mature, creative with a ripe and laughing nod to art, dreams and even (the bonus) classy kitsch.

A Sony Pictures Classics release. Director, writer: Francis Ford Coppola. Cast: Tim Roth, Alexandra Maria Lara, Bruno Ganz, Marcel Iures, Andre Hennicke. Running time: 2 hours. Rated R. 4 stars.

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