Movie Review: '4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days'

by Arthur Salm

A film of brutal, breathtaking intelligence, a work of pellucid, shimmering art without a scintilla of compromise, "4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days" is surely one of the very best films of the year. And you can pick the year.

'4 MONTHS, 3 WEEKS, AND 2 DAYS' - Anamaria Marinca stars in the drama '4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days.' CNS Photo courtesy of Mobra Films. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) Romania, 1987. The communist regime of Nicolae Ceausescu will collapse in two years, but of course no one knows that. Gabita (Laura Vasiliu) and Otilia (Anamaria Marinca) are roommates, university students in a bleak, rundown dorm. Gabita seems nervous and distracted as she ineffectually - ditsily, even - packs for a trip. Otilia scurries around getting things done for her.

Money? Borrow some more from her boyfriend. Cigarettes? The guy down the hall runs a black-market minimart out of his room.

It becomes clear that the entire, decrepit society is fueled by such offhanded, off-the-books enterprises. They're the only way anyone can maneuver through the casual brutality and petty tyrannies of the state. As she tries to arrange a room for Gabita, Otilia is humiliated by snotty bureaucrats, bullied by hotel clerks. This is a system that isn't overtly or even intentionally evil, but rather - as if this made things any better -

across-the-board incompetent, casually mean and infuriatingly stupid.

This enervating ethos is captured perfectly by cinematographer Oleg Mutu, who has leached the film pallid; primary colors seem beyond any imagining. Director and screenwriter Cristian Mugi ("The Death of Mr. Lazarescu") has shrewdly made this a journey not of Gabita, who would seem to be the principal subject, but of Otilia. The enormous, horrific lengths to which Otilia will be forced to go to help Gabita - and it's not even clear that the two are really friends - tells the tale: In this vaguely hostile, poorly functioning world, people, especially women in this situation, are simply there for each other. No questions asked, no explanations offered.

For Gabita, as it happens, isn't going on a trip. She has arranged to have an abortion, illegal at that time in Romania. Or rather, the can-do Otilia ends up arranging it for her, even stepping in to meet Bebe (Vlad Ivanov), the abortionist, to work out the awkward details.

What follows is a scale-model horror show of existence under a totalitarian regime. Cold and calculating and coolly vicious, Bebe intimidates, overpowers, brutalizes the women unspeakably, achieving most of his aims by simply sitting in a chair and talking, interrupting, at only one terrifying moment raising his voice. Otilia sits near him, absorbing the blows; Gaby lies on a bed, offscreen but excruciatingly present.

"4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days" grows darker, visually and viscerally. Near the end, as Otilia staggers through the night, we can barely make her out, yet we couldn't be more with her, locked into her shattering journey through this brilliant, shattering film.

Winner of any number of prizes, including the Palme d'Or at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival, "4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days" is not an Academy Award nominee, which tells you everything you need to know, if you didn't already, about the Academy Awards.

"4 Months, 3 Weeks, and 2 Days." Running time: 1 hour, 53 minutes. Rated: Unrated (with subtitles). 4 stars.