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'Closer To The Moon'

By Sophie Braccini



Image provided

Filed in English by Romania's most popular director, Nae Caranfil, "Closer to the Moon" - which features English and American actors and opens at the Orinda Theatre Aug. 14 - is based on a dramatic and surrealistic bank robbery that happened in the country in 1959. The story is puzzling at first then slowly begins to make sense, if any sense can be made of the absurdity of a totalitarian regime. The protagonists portrayed in this film could be characters in a book by Romania's well-known author Eugene Ionesco and his theater of the absurd.

In Communist Romania, Max Rosenthal, former head of the investigative branch of the state police, and four other Jewish former partisans, rob an enormous amount of money from the National Bank, in the middle of Bucharest, in broad daylight, while pretending that they are shooting a movie. The five are caught, tried and sentenced to death. But an investigator who is wondering about their motives - why steal money that is not exchangeable in a country where you can't buy much - convinces the government to produce a reenactment film of the robbery for propaganda purposes, and tries to extract from the five the real motives for the theft.

The film's overtone is quite dramatic. The heroes of the movie, when they decide to rob the bank and willingly put their lives on the line, feel desperate and trapped with no hope of escape, and they risk everything on this sophomoric prank to

highlight weaknesses within the regime.

The actors, especially British actor Mark Strong ("The Imitation Game," "Sherlock Holmes") and his seductive presence, as well as American actress and Academy Award nominee Vera Farmiga ("Up in the Air," "The Departed") give an excellent and convincing performance. But Romanian critics cited historical errors in the movie, from Rosenthal's rank, to the role of the five during the fight against Nazis, to how they conducted the trial, or the uniforms and armaments used at the time. And there are also exaggerated portrayals of the antagonistic characters. Securitate personnel, communists and others in the system are either overly drunk, obsessed insomniacs, overly soulless or hysterical. The lightness of this dark comedy is also somewhat detrimental to the dramatic impact of the movie.

Nonetheless, the film portrays an extraordinary act of rebelliousness, a slap in the face of a totalitarian system and an act of sacrifice. It was done to give hope and confidence to the people that the system was not invincible. And for that, four of the five paid with their lives.

"Closer to the Moon" will run for one week starting Aug. 14 at the Orinda Theatre as part of the International Film Showcase. For information, visit lamorindatheatres.org.

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