

Iciar Bollain Talks About ‘The Olive Tree,’ Spain’s Crisis and Natural Beauty

John Hopewell (<https://variety.com/author/john-hopewell/>)

Chief International Correspondent

[@john_hopewell](https://twitter.com/john_hopewell) (http://twitter.com/john_hopewell)



MARCH 7, 2016 | 04:00AM PT

PHOTO BY JOSE HARO

‘A feel-good movie with a mission,’ Bollain’s latest world premieres in Miami, then segues to Guadalajara

GUADALAJARA – Directed by Iciar Bollain (<http://variety.com/t/iciar-bollain/>) (“Even the Rain,” “Take My Eyes”), written by Ken Loach scribe Paul Laverty, and lead-produced by Juan Gordon at Spain’s Morena Films (<http://variety.com/t/morena-films/>), “The Olive Tree (<http://variety.com/t/the-olive-tree/>)” world premieres at the Miami Intl. Film Festival, then segues to Mexico’s Guadalajara Fest. In art and industry terms, the world premiere of a

film by Iciar Bollain is always an event. Few directors have carried with such success the mantle of Spain's great art-house cinema tradition that exploded onto Spanish screens during the heady days of its 1970s formal transition to democracy. The excitement of those films – José Luis Borau's "Poachers," Carlos Saura's "Raise Ravens" – can still be sensed on any re-viewing. Bollain and Laverty's collaboration is one of the great – and largely unsung – wife-husband creative partnerships of European filmmaking. "A feel-good drama with a mission," in Gordon's words, "The Olive Tree" turns on Alma, a feisty 20-year-old who works on her family's farm in the stunning olive groves of sunlit Castellon on the east coast of Spain. When her grandfather, whom she idolized as a child, stops eating and fades fast, Alma conceives the madcap idea of driving in a lorry, borrowed without permission, with a rag-tag team – a friend who dotes on her (Pep Ambros) and her hot-blooded uncle (Javier Gutierrez) to Germany to retrieve the greatest of the family's 2,000 year-old olive trees, after whose sale her grandfather never spoke another word.

Spain's transition films talked to audiences about newfound freedoms, the weight of the past. "The Olive Tree" mixes ideas – how Spaniards are losing touch with natural bonds, whether with nature, family and friends – with a quest-based narrative reminiscent of fairy tales of old. Few Spanish films have dealt with such clarity, however indirect, with the social, economic and indeed emotional devastation of Spain's boom-to-bust crisis with a family still laboring to recover from a reckless but bank-encouraged launch of a beachside restaurant, which proved to have little market. As a crossover film, "The Olive Tree's" challenge, 40 years after the transition, is to reach audiences, allowing them to sense the emotional weight of its ideas. It boasts a producer pedigree: Spain's Morena Films and Match Factory Productions in Germany.

Announced after Berlin's European Film Market, its pre-sales, chalked up by eOne's Seville Intl., mark it out as one of a small clutch of early 2016 foreign-language movies which have locked in key pre-sales: France's Haut et Court, Japan's At Entertainment, and Benelux's September Films figure among 11 licensing deals. Piffli Medien/Film Coopli distribute in Germany, eOne in Spain, bowing "The Olive Tree" on May 6.

“‘The Olive Tree’ both literally and figuratively crosses international borders, telling the inspirational and poignant story of a vibrant, determined young woman on a journey, who deeply affects those she meets along the way, regardless of differences in background or opinion,” said Anick Poirier, senior vice president, sales, Seville International (<http://variety.com/t/seville-international/>).

“We are proud to have secured a slate of sales that will allow Iciar’s beautiful film to speak to audiences around the world,” she added.

A few days off its world premiere, Iciar Bollain talked to *Variety* about “The Olive Tree,” its sense of journey, and potential audience.

You could say “The Olive Tree” is about a young woman, Alma, who wants to recuperate a tree, so as to recuperate their grandfather, who seems lost to the world. It’s also in a wider sense about the importance of natural bonds, whether with nature, with one’s family or friends. The largest character arc is Alma’s.

Alma is trying to connect again with a moment when she thinks she was much happier, her childhood. There were lines of dialogue in the screenplay that aren’t in the movie because I thought they were too much but they kind of say that it was a moment when Alma was at the best. And from then on she lost herself, damaged herself, is at war with the family, her father, with the world. So she has to connect again with that Alma, that innocence, and precious time. The trip to Germany may be mad, might not get back the olive tree, but it moves everything around her and leads to her family sealing its wounds.

There’s a suggestion in the scene where she revisits the now empty family restaurant with her uncle that she suffers a lack of self-respect after she complained year’s back to her father that she was being molested by another employee and he didn’t lift a finger to protect her....

Yes, the family sells the olive tree against the grandfather’s wishes, and then her father fails to defend her and since then everything has gone pretty well wrong.

The film is about a journey and almost all the characters, – and this of course is a classic film set up – are on a journey, emotional, psychological and literal. The grandfather walks in his orchards, you have a lot of lovely shots of Alma on her bike going to look for him, and the lorry heading north towards France across stunningly aesthetic countryside.

Yes, that's the thing: Paul and I discussed this when he was writing the screenplay. Alma has to change, and this is almost more of an interior than exterior journey. She has to confront a lot of things. She feels she's not treated with respect, but then makes fun of her uncle. She realizes on the trip how much respect and love Rafa, who accompanies her, has for her. And how much her uncle is ready to do for her. She has to turn the page. In a way, with the journey to Germany, she finally leaves adolescence behind and is ready to forgive and start afresh.

Visually, and also in the audio silence in the scenes in the olive groves, "The Olive Tree" captures the often stunning beauty of rural Spain which I feel sometimes Spaniards don't appreciate, maybe because they have had to labor for centuries, sometimes in ghastly conditions, on its lands.

I don't think we see Spain the beauty of Spain, People like you or Paul who are foreigners really appreciate the landscape. I came to appreciate the olive groves through Paul. I hadn't thought of the olive trees as astonishing, as part of our patrimony, but rather kind of taken them for granted. At the same time, there's not so much appreciation maybe of just how tough it is to work the land, how much people work for so little recompense.

"The Olive Tree" is a film of ideas and sentiments. Whom do you see as its audience?

I think the film can connect with many people of very different ages. As far as we've seen – we've screened it so far three-or-four times – we've had people in their twenties, others middle aged or older. I think young people, who still are close to their grandparents, can connect with certain feelings that Alma has. Older people can certainly connect with the uncle, Alcachofa, or even

Alma. And old people can relate to the film because it talks about old age. So even though there are ideas in the film, its background of Spain's crisis, and a reflection about how we've damaged ourselves, our landscape and the economy, it's a very easy film to follow and very emotional. You may think about the film afterwards, but at the time you just feel them.

Does the film's mix of ideas and emotion raise any challenge?

The challenge is the market's polarization: Either a film's a festival arthouse film or a mainstream popcorn movie. Cinema's middle class – films that want to create and also entertain and touch audiences – seems to be finding difficulties in being seen. I think most audiences would enjoy the film: The problem is reaching them.

Want to read more articles like this one? [SUBSCRIBE TO VARIETY TODAY \(http://pubads.g.doubleclick.net/gampad/clk?id=126980977&iu=/3782/Variety_CM/below-tags/ros\)](http://pubads.g.doubleclick.net/gampad/clk?id=126980977&iu=/3782/Variety_CM/below-tags/ros)

More From The Web