

Art of Amália (2000) Review by Harvey S. Karten,Compuserve

Just eighteen days before the world premiere screening of Bruno De Almeida's non-fiction pic "The Art of Amalia," we received word that Julia Child has been awarded the Legion of Honor, the highest honor that France can bestow. If you know the French, you can believe that this medal is rarely awarded to a foreigner. How does this current event relate to Senhor de Almeida's film? Amalia Rodrigues, Portugal's best-known singer was similarly given that award. For Ms. Rodrigues the award was perhaps more distinctive since, after all, Julia Child devoted her life to promoting French cuisine in the U.S., while Amalia Rodrigues merely performed several times in Paris. Obviously Amalia is a performer worth knowing about. Bruno de Almeida, who lives in New York, does a remarkable job bringing her to life in his non-fiction piece--a ninety-minute work edited down from a five-hour miniseries that ran on European TV, one which the prestigious online magazine Film Threat calls "One of the year's best documentaries." "The Art of Amalia" is crammed so full of a variety of song excerpts--count 'em, sixty- seven -- that one wonders how much additional information de Almeida could have delivered by the unedited version.

"The Art of Amalia" is notable in part for two reasons. One is that the documentary does not go into her personal life, which should be considered nobody's business unless a performer wants particularly to expose her affairs to a broad public. The other is that de Almeida avoids the soul-killing mistake made by so documentarians of making an audience sit through a plethora of talking heads--nieces, uncles, nephews, friends, all gassing about the subject. There's really only one talking head, one person sitting and discussing the subject of the film between shots of actual performances, and that's Amalia herself.

Now, nobody can accuse one of the world's great singers of false modesty. Discussing her art, she settles poised with her long, flaming, dyed red hair, talking without apologies about how she almost literally brought down the house in one concert in Italy, how she is adored wherever she goes, how she sang her heart out to the wild applause of her fans. That's OK. Why pretend? We see proof of her accomplishments by watching her in old newsreels, clips of studio pressings, and best of all live concerts in Paris, Rome, Naples, Los Angeles, Lisbon, Tokyo New York and Rio among other cities. We see how she guides huge throngs into clapping to the rhythms of her more upbeat songs.

While we watch Amalia sing in Italian (Tarantella), in French (Aie, Mourir Pour Toi), and in English (The Nearness of You), her specialty is fado--Portugal's answer to Spain's flamenco in that fado songs are passionate, sad, moody, or to coin the oxymoron used in this film, sweet sadness. While flamenco has been embraced by the world to a much greater extent, popularized in America by Brooklynite Jose Greco, fado is a genre that has relied for its popularity on just one person, the subject of this documentary.

Despite her extravagance of language during her interview appearance, she is (as Internet critic Brian Matherly points out for the Jacksonville Film Journal) "overwhelmed at times" when on stage or presented with medals such as Portugal's Great Cross of the Order of St. Iago de Espada, and in Matherly's view does not emulate "the actions of an egotistical star who revels in her spotlight and immense fame." In fact, she tell us that despite her prominence and fortune, she was never a happy person and in one instance -- during a trip to New York in 1985 -- she had planned to end her life (because of a tumor she had developed, not because of her experiences in the Big Apple). But tumor removed, she continued her 50-year career, surprisingly enough losing little of her vocal qualities even into her seventies.

Bruno de Almeida has done a splendid job of bringing together historical film clips from as far back as 1920, interspersing scenes from performers who influenced Ms. Rodrigues such as Fred Astaire. Sadly, she died one week before the completion of the film, so that our only chance now to hear her would be through her many, many recordings and this exceptional film.