

# Our Beloved Month of August

By ROB NELSON - Variety

A tantalizing mix of documentary, fiction and everything in between (including music video), Miguel Gomes' 150-minute love song to rural Portugal, "Our Beloved Month of August," scores viscerally as well as intellectually. Gorgeously photographed performances by semi-pro Portuguese dance-music bands at the summer Pardieiros festival set one's eyes ablaze and toes tapping, but Gomes goes further to work the brain as a narrative slowly, sneakily emerges out of the verite melody-making. Though the film's length and challenging formal ambiguity will limit its distribution, Gomes' Directors' Fortnight sleeper will continue to blow minds -- and inspire some walkouts, too -- wherever it plays.

Jaunty pop tunes provide the backdrop for Gomes' leisurely portrait of rural Portugal in summer, when music lovers pitch tents by the hundreds to partake of festival revelry. Initially, Gomes follows events -- like the long march of a philharmonic band through small-town streets -- purely for their immediate visual and aural pleasure, and for their historical value.

But halfway through the long pic, it appears Gomes -- who plays himself (or "himself") in scenes where he argues with his producer over casting difficulties -- has begun directing a narrative film about a young female singer who draws the attention of a guitarist. Playing star-crossed lovers Helder and Tania, young leads Sonia Bandeira and Fabio Oliveira have beauty and charisma to spare, proving worthy of Gomes' s "difficult" selection.

Even by the standards of hybrid docu/fiction head-scratchers, "Our Beloved Month of August" is an enjoyably bewildering enigma. The movie sets up an internal debate over which form -- documentary or fiction -- is more effective for capturing this milieu, or any setting in general. In performance scenes that appear late in the film, lyrics begin to seem fictive, like dialogue in a musical. One of the things the deliberately ambiguous movie proves is that music becomes more compelling the more one knows about the musicians; another is that you can often tell a narrative film from a documentary by the omniscience of the camera operator -- whether he or she seems to know where the figures in the frame are going.

Not everyone will be infatuated or even tolerant of pic's meta-cinematic games, as when Gomes appears preparing an elaborate domino setup for, he says, his opening-credits scene, only to be interrupted suddenly by clichéd tough guys who look as though they've burst in from a spaghetti Western. Gomes later tells his producer that the script he's struggling to shoot with actors is a "terror film" version of "Little Red Riding Hood," a development that will cause the viewer some alarm in the final stretch. Horror of a sort does make its way into the documentary sections of the film, as Gomes lingers on the flaying of skin off a dead boar while the soundtrack perversely plays up-tempo dance music.

In a film that rigorously explores the intersection of authenticity and artifice, the innovative closing-credits sequence is a modern classic of formal sound-recording playfulness: Each major crew member is introduced on camera, working on the film's sound "problem."

Reviewed at Vancouver Film Festival

(Cinema of Our Time), Oct. 4, 2008. (Also in Cannes Film Festival -- Directors' Fortnight.) Running time: 150 MIN.

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