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Avenger in Brazil

FILMS

Tom Milne on an 'enormously pleasing' film from South America.

WHAT I have never much cared for about Glauber Rocha's films—'Black God, White Devil' in particular—is the suspicion they arouse that he is a great one for hedging his bets by proposing a Marxist-revolutionary message on the basis of a wild religious fanaticism. The resulting dialectical confusion may, of course, be occasioned primarily by his extensive use of Brazilian folklore, which complicates the allegiances of his characters to a point where Western audiences may wonder whether the bandit or the bandit-killer is supposed to be the good guy. So be it; but the sheer tedium of much of 'Black God, White Devil' is something else again.

Antonio das Mortes, now being shown publicly in London for the first time (Times, Baker Street, certificate X), is an altogether different proposition. The chief reason, I suspect, is that it is in colour, and Rocha's bold, slashing imagery makes the film look like a blood-boltered Jacobean tragedy unfolding in a setting dreamed up by Bosch and Canaletto in the style of a medieval tapestry. Peaceful little villages nestle like doll's houses on the mountainside; peasant luminaries dance and flail their flags of rebellion on rocky ledges whose walls tower away out of sight like the caverns of Dante's inferno; Antonio himself, the black-clad avenger, either broods ominously in close-up or wanders out into grey-green spiky deserts which look as though they had been fossilised since the dawn of time; and in the final sequence, a Negro robed in scarlet rides through the village square like St George on his charger to impale the capitalist dragon on his yellow lance.

The film, in a word, is operatic, and enormously pleasing if you enjoy watching a director give himself up to demonic possession. One of the most striking motifs in the film, for instance, concerns a lady clad in brilliant, diaphanous purple who stabs her false lover over and over again with such enthusiasm that she ends with her gown tastefully decorated

with crimson spots. Subsequently, while an alcoholic intellectual for some reason drags the corpse off into the desert, she follows demurely behind, trailing purple in the wind and clutching a radiant bouquet of artificial flowers until she, he and the corpse fall inextricably into one another's arms in a fanatically ghoulish bout of love-making.

Possibly because Rocha is able to make use of his gift for colour to explain and enhance the rituals, the dances, the recurring massacres and bizarre confrontations which appear to be part and parcel of his vision, 'Antonio das Mortes' seems to me not only a better film, but better propaganda than 'Black God, White Devil,' of which it is virtually a continuation.

Fresh from his extermination of the last *cangaceiro* in the earlier film, Antonio the legendary bandit-killer learns that his traditional enemy has reappeared in the poverty-stricken *sertão* of north-eastern Brazil, and steps right out of urban civilisation into the primitive world of legend to investigate. What follows is a grim death's jest book of blood and violence, unmistakable in its allegiances, as Antonio kills the *cangaceiro*, discovers that he has been used as a tool by the landowner, and changes sides in a crisis of brooding mysticism before disappearing back into the world of cars and buses. I found it compulsive viewing.

Showing in the same double bill at the Times, and rather swamped by Rocha's bravura fireworks, *Close to the Wind* (certificate X) is an engaging first film by Swedish director Stellan Olsson, sometimes naïve but with a genuine feel for unexpected detail. Per Oscars-

son plays an amiable, vaguely rebellious artist, happily married with three children, who is given to such forlorn gestures as tearing down the fence around his house in the cause of freedom, or showing pornographic engravings to a staid board of directors in the hope that they will be moved to approve new ideas in art.

After a personal crisis when his ideas fall flat, his wife objects to his affair with a girl who sells Vietnam leaflets, and he catches himself in the act of selling out to money and fame, he returns home presumably to live happily ever after. There isn't much to it, but the fact that Oscarsson's real-life wife and children are cast as his family—their scenes together are clearly improvised much of the time—gives the film a gentle, amiable warmth. I hope I don't damn it with faint praise, because it really is rather a nice film, in the best sense of the word.

A few years ago, Robert Aldrich hit the jackpot with 'The Dirty Dozen' and a view of war which managed to have its cake and eat it by coating its heroics with a thin tarnish of cynicism. In *Too Late The Hero* (Odeon, Leicester Square from 27 August, certificate X) he tries the same formula again, on the whole rather more wittily if less successfully. The setting this time is the Pacific during the Second World War, and the premise a band of reluctant heroes who have to get from one end of a Jap-infested island to the other in order to transmit a phony radio message in the hope of distracting Japanese attention from an American naval task force.

Fairly predictable anti-war sentiments come from Michael Caine and Cliff Robertson as the two main protagonists who rub national hostilities off on each other, and whose main preoccupation is with saving their own skins. The usual collection of cowards, bullies and fresh-faced loons go along for the trip, but there are some excellent character sketches (by Denholm Elliott and Ian Bannen, in particular), and the bantering dialogue is often very funny. Aldrich directs with his usual efficiency, but makes surprisingly little capital out of the Philippines locations.

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