



Monday 23 September at 6:30 pm

AFS thanks The Surrey Hotel

Zama

Argentina/Brazil/Spain 2017

Director: Lucrecia Martel

Producers: Benjamín Domenech, Santiago Gallelli, Matías Roveda, Vânia Catani

Production co: Rei Cine, Bananiera Filmes, El Deseo, Patagonik, MPM Film, Canana, Lemming Film, KNM, O Som e a Fúria, Louverture Films, Telecine, Perdomo Pictures, Picnic Producciones

Screenplay: Lucrecia Martel. Based on the novel by Antonio Di Benedetto

Photography: Rui Poças

Editor: Miguel Schverdfinger, Karen Harley

With: Daniel Giménez Cacho (Zama), Lola Dueñas (Luciana Piñares De Luenga), Matheus Nachtergaele (Vicuña Porto), Juan Minujín (Ventura Prieto), Rafael Spregelburd (Capitán Parrilla), Nahuel Cano (Fernández), Mariana Nunes (Malemba), Daniel Veronese (Gobernador Il)

115 mins, DCP. M violence & nudity
In Spanish with English subtitles

At first blush, *Zama* is close kin to *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, the towering 1972 Werner Herzog classic about a Spanish conquistador losing his way and his mind in 16th-century South America. There's a deluded European colonizer at the new movie's center, too – Don Diego de Zama (Daniel Giménez Cacho), an administrative functionary serving the royal court of Spain in the wilds of Paraguay at the tail end of the 18th century. As in *Aguirre*, the tone is detached, the plot minimal, the action cruel, the visuals serene and increasingly phantasmagoric. The jungle seems ready to reclaim the characters at any moment. If Herzog is a mystic and a shaman, though, Argentina's Lucrecia Martel is a more hardheaded sort of cinematic poet. Based on her countryman Antonio di Benedetto's existential 1958 novel of the same name, *Zama* is a political treatise under cover of a dark Kafkaesque comedy. The message is that a colonizer destroys everything he touches but nothing so much as the colonizer himself. Some movies unfold as dreams; *Zama* dances us toward the edge of nightmare and then asks us to open our eyes. – Ty Burr, *Boston Globe*

Unlike ostensibly similar slow-cinema films, Martel's leisurely pacing does not connote a paucity of action or intrigue. If anything, *Zama*'s sluggish rhythms belie a surfeit of incident: Every scene is steamy with background activity, the air thick with hidden motivations and unspoken crosscurrents. It is heady and tactile, with *Tabu* DP Rui Poças creating exquisitely precise frames, and sound designer Guido Berenblum then coloring in a whole universe of chirruping crickets and stagnant waters outside them. Every close up is a portrait and every wide a tableau: at one point Zama is taken to task by a sour-tempered superior and we can actually hear the old man blink. The formal control is remarkable, but sometimes almost stultifying, as though Martel had spent every moment of this intervening decade plotting how to pack each scene more densely, to the point it feels like Zama could maybe stop a bullet.

There is some Quixote here, not just because of the language and time frame, but also because of the essential futility of so much of Zama's endeavor. But the real literary touchpoints are more modern: Zama waits for deliverance that never comes like a Beckett character and goes insane through upriver isolation like a mid-ranking Colonel Kurtz. And Kafka would get a dry chuckle out of the irony that is going on a manhunt for a man you know is a member of the hunting party, or seeing the reward you hoped to gain meted out to your enemy as a punishment. But then, the challenging, patience-testing, yet undeniably visionary Zama is neither of the past nor of the present, but belongs to some half-lit eternity instead, where people have been consigned to atone for sins they only foggily remember committing, and have nothing to do but wait out the Purgatory of prolonged hope. – Jessica Kiang, *The Playlist*



Monday 30 September at 6:00 pm

Early start: long run time

Ash is Purest White

Jianghu er wan

China 2018

Director/Screenplay: Jia Zhangke

Producers: Shozo Ichiyama, Nathanaël Karmitz

Production co: Shozo Ichiyama, Nathanaël Karmitz Productions, Office Kitano

Photography: Eric Gautier

Editor: Laclau, Lin Xudong

Music: Lim Giong

With: Zhao Tao, Liao Fan, Xu Zheng, Casper Liang, Feng Xiaogang, Diao Yinan

141 mins, DCP. R13 violence
In Mandarin with English subtitles

Jia Zhang-ke's latest is an often glorious drama about how one woman's journey from self-sacrificial moll to avenging criminal echoes her country's embrace of capitalism. – Peter Bradshaw, *Guardian*

A strange and haunting gangster epic that explores the soul of modern China. Nicholas Barber, *BBC*

[This is] a story of thwarted yet oddly resilient love, as well as a beautiful marriage of the political and the personal. That particular synthesis is nothing new for Jia Zhangke, the revered Chinese writer-director whose work brings the chaos of life in his rapidly evolving country into hyper-crisp digital focus. In *Ash Is Purest White*, he subtly distills nearly two decades of gradual social change into the story of a small-town gangster and his moll. The movie opens in 2001, in the northern village of Datong, where Guo Bin (Liao Fan), a member of the jianghu underworld, runs a mahjong parlor and enjoys the sycophantic attention of his comrades and underlings.

But from the start, it's Bin's girlfriend, Qiao (Zhao Tao), who magnetizes the camera's attention, whether she's playfully socking his buddies or hitting the dance floor while "YMCA" blasts in the background. A fiercely devoted partner to Bin, she more than holds her own in this masculine enclave, and her own belief in the brotherly codes of the jianghu, a commitment referenced by the title, runs startlingly deep. When Bin is attacked by local thugs, it is Qiao who fatefully intervenes and pays the steepest price. From there, the film undergoes a series of thrilling narrative reversals but always keeps Qiao at the fore, grounding its portrait of long-term social and technological flux with the kind of gutsy, lovelorn heroine who would be right at home in a 1940s Hollywood melodrama. Qiao and Bin continue to cross paths over the years, at times enjoying the odd moment of tenderness, only to have the past come rushing back with seething, explosive force. But their difficult present and uncertain future weigh on them no less heavily.

Jia likes to hold his characters in a tight visual embrace, then cut away to something – a train navigating the countryside, or the stars shimmering in the night sky – that places their drama into awe-stirring perspective. This is a movie about how time and circumstance conspire to make dazed, restless wanderers of us all. But no familiarity with Jia's earlier work is necessary to appreciate *Ash Is Purest White*, which is fierce, gripping, emotionally generous and surprisingly funny: The movie's most entertaining moments find Qiao using her hard-earned street smarts to pull herself out of short-term hunger and poverty. Meanwhile, even those accustomed to seeing Zhao in Jia's movies (the two are married and collaborate frequently) might be taken aback by the depths of her acting here. *Mountains May Depart* was a breakthrough for her, and she surpasses it here with the richest, most subtly complex performance she's given to date. – Justin Chang, *LA Times*