

Review: *Hour of the Star*

# Small masterpiece from Brazil

by Lois Wadsworth

From Brazil comes Director Suzana Amaral's prize-winning film starring the stunningly credible Marcelia Cartaxo as Macabea, a poor peasant girl from the north who comes to the city.

Macabea is totally unaware of all social graces. She gets a job as a typist, but she spoils everything she works on. She eats at her typewriter; she cries and wipes her nose on her dress; she is unkempt, unattractive, dirty, and smelly. She does not know how to make the simplest conversation. Her education, such as it is, comes from the radio she listens to late at night. Office-mate Gloria tells Macabea how awful she looks when the unartful girl appears at work with her new lipstick smeared. Macabea's personal habits are disgusting and her passivity maddening. She is the ultimate victim, and the crime is poverty. The repression that comes from living within such confined strictures is profound.

And yet, the transcendent takes place even amid such limited possibilities. Macabea's innocence of spirit is true; she is guileless and trusting to an extent unfathomable to our minds. She meets Olimpico, a man who seems interested in her, but who rudely re-

jects her simplest attempts to understand the new world she is living in. Virginal Macabea's sexuality emerges slowly but inexorably, and despite Olimpico's cruelty, the girl fantasizes marrying him. Once when all her roommates are gone from their quarters, she dresses in sheets and looks at herself in the mirror and dances her dreams. In many of these intimate scenes I was reminded of that graceless period of early adolescence where hormones and dreams mingle with physical gawkiness and the terrible uncertainty of all new social situations. This capability to make us identify with Macabea reveals the sure touch of the director's intelligent and compassionate humanity.

Like all of Macabea's dreams, her gross inexperience in life ill prepares her to bring them about. The women with whom she shares her room are much more worldly, but none of them help her. She is hopelessly doomed from the beginning. Late in the film, she visits a fortuneteller at Gloria's insistence. Madame Carlotta reads her cards and gives the poor girl hope beyond her wildest imaginings. The supreme moment in the film is Macabea's belief that all her dreams are about to come true.

She appears then to us as transformed, beautiful.

*Hour of the Star* is a small masterpiece from a new director, Suzana Amaral. The screenplay is based on a 1977 novel of the same name by Clarice Lispector, one of Brazil's most famous writers. Amaral's neo-realism turns Lispector's social criticism into what film critic Andrew Sarris calls "a redemptive icon of the world's oppressed." He quotes this passage from the novel:

*"The anonymous girl of this story is so ancient that she could be described as biblical. She was subterranean and had never really flowered. I am telling a lie; she was wild grass."*

It is to the everlasting credit of Suzana Amaral and the brilliant acting of Marcelia Cartaxo that Macabea lives for us, however briefly, on the screen. For this is not only an important film, it is undeniably true. Amaral creates a heroine very unlike herself without stooping to patronize her or constrain her humanity. She gets excellent supporting performances from Tamara Taxman as Gloria, Jose Dumont as Olimpico, and Fernanda Montenegro as Carlotta. She tells the story in a forthright



Marcelia Cartaxo stars in the prize-winning film, *Hour of the Star*.

fashion, amplifying the sparse dialogue with naturalistic non-verbal exchanges and clear images. This is the first feature-length film the 52-year-old director has made, and I am eager for the next already. Suzana Amaral:

*I will have to work very hard and very quickly to be one of the best. Anyway, I agree with Carl Jung, the second half is when your life really begins—you have more courage then, you are freer."*

*"I began film-making late and*

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