

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2023/24 SEASON



ALCARRÀS
(Language: Catalan)

Director: Carla Simón, 2022. Running time: 120 minutes.
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 24 January 2024.

“Carla Simón’s award-winning story of a peach farmer struggling to make ends meet asks many important questions about our relationship with the land and the human cost of progress.”

“Capitalism never looked more brutal than in this new Catalan-language movie with nonprofessionals from Carla Simón; it is about an extended family of peach farmers in the town of Alcarràs, people whose unhappiness and dysfunction are created by market forces. It was the winner of the Golden Bear at the Berlin film festival and is this year’s Spanish entry for the best international film Academy Award.

Simón’s debut was the wonderfully tender childhood study *Summer 1993* and *Alcarràs* is her very accomplished follow-up. I felt it didn’t quite have the same immediately accessible richness and sweetness, but this is a really shrewd, empathic and subtle movie which engulfs you in its dust and sweat and heat.

Quimet, played by Jordi Pujol Dolcet, is a middleaged farmer who lives with his clan in a rambling rented house with its own swimming pool, surrounded by peach trees, whose delicious fruit he is getting ready to harvest: backbreakingly hard work which he does by hand with family members, together with some African immigrant labour. His wife Dolors (Anna Otín) helps, as does his son Roger (Albert Bosch) – though Dolors has onerous housework and childcare, as well as having to massage Quimet’s aching back, with little thanks from her grumpy and depressed husband. Their teen daughter Mariona (Xènia Roset) is busy rehearsing a dance number for the town’s summer talent show, and their youngest, Iris (Ainet Jounou), likes playing in an abandoned car in the farmland with her cousins Pau (Isaac Rovira) and Pere (Joel Rovira).

To Iris’s awestruck astonishment, strange grownups arrive one day and take away her beloved car: this is an awful omen of the problems to come. The supermarkets are offering Quimet insultingly low prices for his produce, and like other farmers he is getting ready for a mass protest. But his landlord, Pinyol (Jacob Diarte) has in any case curtly informed him that all the peach trees are to be ripped out and replaced with solar panels, and if he wants, he can retrain as a solar panel engineer, which is far more lucrative. Quimet’s elderly father

Rogelio (Josep Abad) failed to get their land-tenancy in writing: it was merely a gentleman's agreement with Pinyol's late father which the son has ignored.

This agony tears their family apart: Quimet is enraged that his way of life has been cancelled, but his sister and brother-in-law want to take the solar panel deal and his son Roger is in any case hurt at his father's contemptuous indifference to all his new ideas on irrigation. And so Quimet, exploited by the landlord class, is also cruel to his own staff, the labourers that he must mostly lay off.

Movies about rural ways of life are often supposed to be all about the sacred, seasonal rhythm of reaping and sowing. But here there is no rhythm. There is just one continuous throb of anxiety: whether the crop will fail, whether it will be eaten by rabbits, whether it will be underpriced by the supermarket buyers. And now the whole system has been thrown out. There is a new harvest to be gathered: solar power.

Simón's film asks us: is Quimet right to be outraged or not? Is there something sacred about the planting, growing and selling of peaches? Aren't solar panels, with their superiority to fossil fuels, just as important? Might Quimet be, in some inexpressibly painful sense, simply loyal to unhappiness, loyal to a business that has not brought him satisfaction? There is something agonising, almost self-harming in Quimet's protest stunt: he dumps a mountain of his precious peaches outside the supermarket offices: a vast, squelchy pile symbolising his wretchedness and rage. It is a deeply intelligent, humane drama."

Peter Bradshaw, *The Guardian*, 3 January 2023.

"Children play happily in an abandoned jalopy; dad commands the family farm through chronic back pain and a constant torrent of cursing; underpaid migrant workers toil under the Catalan sun. This is the bruised bucolic picture presented in *Alcarràs*, Carla Simón's Berlin Film Festival-winning second feature after 2017's little wonder *Summer 1993*.

In that film, the shadow of death hung over two orphaned children; here it is the end of a way of life that threatens a family of peach growers faced with being uprooted from their home along with the trees that provide their livelihood. The fruit appears not as some magical gift but through hard graft. Nature in *Alcarràs* is both benevolent mother and pitiless, unpredictable mistress.

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Other surprises are in store: the verbal agreement that grandfather made with the wealthy landowners, it turns out, was worth not a peseta, even if it was forged amid shared persecution from Franco's forces. This will be the last harvest and belts will be tightened; even the migrant workers must go. How will the family manage? "We will work harder!" barks pain-stricken paterfamilias Quimet (Jordi Pujol Dolcet) with a wince.

Simón weaves in the social commentary and reflections on Spain's divided past and present almost imperceptibly; less so observations on the forward march of modernity. Eldest son Roger (Albert Bosch) sows' cannabis plants near the peach groves as a side hustle while teenage sister Mariona (Xènia Roset) practises TikTok-friendly dance moves close by — neither scheme bearing fruit. All the while a ticking clock counts down towards the end of the old ways and the arrival of solar panels that will consume the land like sleek metallic locusts.

After the intimacy of *Summer 1993*, Simón here guides a large multigenerational ensemble with a sure hand, their exquisitely naturalistic performances seeming to appear organically. Meanwhile her script (co-written with Arnau Vilaró) achieves a satisfying sweetness without sugar-coating, finding notes of bitterness in inner family tensions and dealings with a not always co-operative agricultural co-operative. When the last peach is plucked and the diggers arrive, there is a real sense of what is being lost — not some blissful Eden but a way of life nonetheless."

Raphael Abraham, *Financial Times*, 5 January 2023

"Traditional agricultural ways of life are in trouble around the world. In Spain, the global trend of corporate consolidation is dovetailing with the tepid neoliberal response to global warming, and as captured by *Alcarràs*, it's leading to farmers losing their livelihood. Carla Simón's follow-up to *Summer 1993* features a cast of non-professional actors drawn from the rural area where the story takes place. It's one neorealist gesture in a film that might have benefited from adopting a few more—particularly that cinematic movement's clarity of action. While *Alcarràs* excels at building a convincing milieu, it lacks the strong sense of tension and moral urgency that its story would seem to demand.

Simón coaxes strikingly naturalistic performances from her cast, in particular the trio of young children whose characters serve as the story's focal points in

the film's most engrossing scenes. Iris (Ainet Jounou) and her twin cousins, Pere and Pau (Joel and Isaac Rovira), spend their time goofing around her father Quimet's (Jordi Pujol Dolcet) peach orchard, from making harvesting baskets into forts to pretending that the old car by the reservoir is a spaceship. Simón begins *Alcarràs* in that space of childhood fantasy, only to have it broken by the reality of the backhoe that arrives to clear the land and make way for a solar farm.

As is gradually revealed between the world-building moments that comprise much of the early stretches of the film, the actual landowner, Pinyol (Jacob Diarte), has sold the land that Quimet's family has been farming since the Spanish Civil War to speculators and clean-energy startups. The artificially low price of produce has been driving many local landowners to do the same. While Quimet's brother-in-law, Cisco (Carles Cabós), has joined forces with these powers that be, helping to facilitate the installment of the solar panels, Quimet and the multigenerational portion of the family that still works the land have committed themselves to a bigger harvest this year, and defiantly join in local protests against farming conditions.

Rounding out the principal characters are Quimet's wife, Dolors (Anna Otín); their teenage children, Mariona (Xènia Roset) and Roger (Albert Bosch); and the man's father, Rogelio (Josep Abad). Each has a distinct presence: Rogelio is the kind and wistful grandfather, while Dolors is the unflappable mother who attempts to keep everyone on stable ground as they cope with the stress of losing the farm. But it's the teens that have the most pronounced, if not always elegantly illustrated, character arcs. Nursing a rebellious streak that's most clearly exemplified by his secret marijuana garden, Roger alternates between duly performing his duties and sullenly rejecting them. Meanwhile, Mariona and her friends are choreographing a hip-hop-style dance for the local town festival, which is situated as a kind of coming-of-age ritual.

Each of the film's characters feels fully lived in, as does the family dynamic that shapes them. As the burly, perpetually stressed patriarch, Dolcet in particular conveys a palpable sense of the physical and psychological effects of working the land for decades, as well as Quimet's disquiet over knowing that his family's world is about to come to an abrupt end. Elsewhere, Mariona and Roger's teen anguish never feels forced, and Iris's encounters with life-and-death matters in both play and reality constitute *Alcarràs*'s most affecting through line.

These subplots, though, weave in and out of the story with scant momentum. The feeling of stasis where there should be crisis—after all, a family's livelihood is at stake here—partially stems from cinematographer Daniela

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Cajías’s rather monotonous camerawork, which often follows the characters tightly in medium close-up, rarely giving us establishing views that would have provided more dynamism and a sense of space to the proceedings. And, given the narrative’s ambulatory exploration of the characters’ different worlds, the encroachment of big capital on the family’s way of life doesn’t possess the kind of accumulating force that would give the culmination of the various threads a deep emotional impact.

Despite its inability to weave its threads into a harrowing neorealist knot, *Alcarràs* crafts a detailed portrait of a specific and endangered lifestyle. As a tribute to farmers’ way of life, its effective and at times moving, but as an exposé of the potential losses that a business-centric green revolution is in the process of incurring, it wants for a stiffer punch. Inadvertently, it leaves one wondering whether a documentary would have harvested better material.”

Pat Brown, *Slant*, February 18, 2022.