

The Age Wed 14 Sept 05 p.17

A veritable feast of films from Voulgaris

FESTIVAL REVIEW ANTIPODES GREEK FILM FESTIVAL: PANTELIS VOULGARIS

Como, until September 25
Adrian Martin Reviewer

LOCAL audiences are accustomed to thinking that art movies from other countries are distinguished by their sometimes obsessive concentration on the preparation and consumption of food.

Greek filmmaker Pantelis Voulgaris — a guest of the current Antipodes Film Festival, which is honouring his work with a retrospective — rarely misses an opportunity to record the rituals of cooking and eating.

What Voulgaris uses such scenes for, however, has nothing to do with the jollity and gregari-

ousness of a *Babette's Feast* or *Au Petit Marguery*. As in most food movies, Voulgaris certainly stresses the social, communal aspect of dining and drinking. But there is a darker mood in the air: an intimation of things not said, a sense of wasted possibilities.

In the final story of his three-part *It's a Long Road* (1997), Voulgaris dramatises the death-driven path of a successful businessman (Giorgos Armenis) whose wife has just walked out on him, taking the kids.

He arrives at a remote bar starkly named Vietnam, and proceeds to use his vast wealth to ensure that every plate in this tawdry joint is smashed, as showgirls and musicians perform around him. But there is no Dionysian release in his excess

— only an endlessly rehearsed “acting out” of his bitterness and hopelessness.

An early work by Voulgaris, *The Engagement of Anna* (1972), shows us the web of domestic oppression that keeps its heroine (Anna Vagen) in a permanently depressed state. Here, in this

¶ One aspect of Voulgaris' cinema that is hard to overlook is its relative humourlessness. ¶

strikingly feminist testament, the rituals of table function as the chains of everyday life, blocking Anna from reaching out to any form of personal liberation.

One aspect of Voulgaris' cinema that is hard to overlook is

its relative humourlessness. The protagonists of *The Engagement of Anna* and *It's a Long Road* are dour, silent creatures, beaten down by their histories of personal suffering. When the bottled-up words and emotions do flow in a rare soliloquy, it usually ends in tearful hysteria, as with the gamekeeper superbly played by Thanassis Vengos in the middle tale of *Long Road*.

Voulgaris' 1985 film *Stone Years*, which concerns the “eclipse of the Greek left” between 1954 and 1974, sheds an intriguing light on this tight-lipped behaviour. Melbourne academic Nikos Papastergiadis once observed in *Arena* magazine that, within such a repressive climate, “one's senses, one's body, are the prison”, and that Voulgaris thus tries to “hold

back the emotional reaction to the horror conveyed in just the way that those who live it must contain their reaction”.

Voulgaris has now made 10 features, of which Antipodes is screening six. His style has changed a great deal over this time, from the fastidious neo-realism of *The Engagement of Anna* to the solemn, poetic mode of *It's a Long Road*.

His most recent and most lavish production, *Brides* (pre-viewed by Antipodes and set for local release) draws closer to conventional drama, while providing a panorama of individual and social experience. Unsurprisingly, in this tale of Greek immigration to America, the preparation of food (and also of clothing) once again plays a major role.