

Mongrel Media

Presents

BENZINA

(Gasoline)

A Film by Monica Stambrini

(Italy, 2001, 85 minutes, In Italian with English subtitles)

*Preliminary Press notes
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BENZINA (GASOLINE)

Director	Monica Stambrini
Based on the novel of	Elena Stancanelli
Screenplay	Monica Stambrini, Elena Stancanelli, AnneRitte Ciccone
Fotography	Fabio Cianchetti
Art direction	Alessandro Rosa
Costumes	Antonella Cannarozzi
Editor	Paola Freddi
Sound	Emanuele Cecere
Music	Massimo Zamboni
Production	Galliano Iuso for Digital Film

Cast	Maya Sansa (Stella)
	Regina Orioli (Lenni)
	Mariella Valentini (la madre)
	Luigi Maria Burruolo
	Chiara Conti
	Marco Quaglia
	Pietro Ragusa.

SYNOPSIS

Benzina is the tenderly dramatic story of two young girls not much over twenty. The story evolves around Stella and Eleonora (nicknamed Lenni), a petrol pump, a snobby, super-bourgeois mother hovering threateningly over Lenni's life, the two girls' love affair and their desire to escape. Then, night time and an accident, or maybe a crime... the desperate escape, like an odyssey, with the cumbersome corpse of the mother to get rid of without being seen.

Two opposing lives to escape from: Lenni, blonde hair, a conventional bourgeois life; Stella, black hair, a chaotic life and no family.

"The petrol station? The happy oasis where they can always be found, without searching for them. The real escape is their love, simple, nearly childish, like the rainbow that appears and shivers in the petrol-covered mud puddles at the service station." (Monica Stambrini).

MONICA STAMBRINI – DIRECTOR

BIOGRAPHY

Monica Stambrini was born in 1970 in Mountain View, California. She studied in Milan, where she received a diploma in cinematographic directing from CFP. She has worked in various capacities for many Italian directors and shot the making of the film *L'assedio* (1998) by Bernardo Bertolucci. She directed numerous short movies between 1991 and 1998, both on film and in video, and has participated at many Italian and international festivals. Between 1999 and 2000 she made six documentaries for RaiSatArte. *Gas* is her first full-length fiction film.

FILMOGRAPHY

Rinvenimenti (cm, 1991), *Riproduzioni* (cm, 1992), *Epitaffio* (mm, 1993), *Ambliopia-Punti di vista* (cm, 1993), *Vorrei urlare!* (cm, doc., 1994), *Animali domestici* (cm, 1995), *Monique publique* (cm, 1997), *Sshhh...* (cm, 1998), *Cent'anni di solitudine* (videoclip, 1998), *Raccontoduepunti* (cm, 1998), *Punti di vista - Steve della Casa* (cm, doc., tv, 1999), *10minuti con George Segal* (cm, doc., tv, 1999), *Out of the House - Gerard Richter* (cm, doc., tv, 1999), *Made in Milan - Conversazione con Michele De Lucchi* (cm, doc., tv, 2000), *Conversazione con Vico Magistretti* (cm, doc., tv, 2000), *Conversazione con Marco Zanuso* (cm, doc., tv, 2000), *Benzina* (2001).

PRODUCTION NOTES & INTERVIEWS

Benzina, the directorial debut of **Moncia Stambrini**, is a lesbian thriller based on the novel by Elena Stancanelli. Stambrini, 31, studied filmmaking in Milan and is known for her militant gay short films that were presented at festivals like Bellaria, and at Milan and San Francisco gay and lesbian festivals.

Stambrini calls *Benzina* “a static road movie.” A petrol pump owner, Stella (Maya Sansa) murders her lover Lenni (Regina Orioli)’s mother by mistake (in the book, it was intentional). Lenni is convinced that she is being pursued by her mother’s ghost and becomes catatonic after hearing her dead mother’s voice. *“It is typical of the female psyche to be aware of your mother’s ghost. I’d have trouble counting the times I’ve saved my mother instead of killing her. Symbolically, of course. And I am still not free of her,”* Stambrini informs us. In the film, the mother (Mariella Valentini) is a potent OTT sex symbol; all tight clothes, high heels and lots of make-up. *“I don’t subscribe to the realist school. If anything, I am surreal,”* says Stambrini, who worked on this project for a number of years.

The lesbian aspects have been toned down but they still manage to upset some men. “All these lesbians kissing is really boring,” said one. *“Given that this is a love story between two women, it was inevitable that there be some love scenes with kissing,”* is Stambrini’s angry response. She is right to be upset. It seems that films about gay women are more difficult to accept. *“Perhaps the men feel left out,”* continued the director. *“Or they envy us.”* This is a genre film about how best to get rid of a dead body and Stambrini has included numerous references to the work of David Lynch, the Coen brothers, Jane Campion’s *Sweetie* and *Go Fish*. *“I tried to avoid being provocative or voyeuristic. There is nothing sordid about the two lovers’ sexuality. It is an innocent love between two girls in their twenties”* says Stambrini.

Benzina is less blatantly militant as one of the protagonist, **Maya Sansa** (Stella) tells us *“the sex scenes were more highly developed in the first screenplay I read. They were also much harder. I was still at the Academy and had just made Marco Bellocchio’s La Balia (the wet nurse), a completely different character, and quite frankly, Benzina scared me.”*

INTERVIEW with REGINA ORIOLI



What was it like working on this all-female set, Regina?

One reason why I agreed to play Lenni was that I had never worked with a woman director before. I don't want to generalise but all the characters I've ever played resemble one another – and every film was directed by a man. Usually they ask me to play a shy timid little animal-like person. Monica saw another side of me: the little animal

that realises it has a pair of sharp teeth and can bite.

Lenni is persecuted by her mother's ghost...

Her ghostly presence allows Lenni to finally come to terms with the difficult relationship they had while her mother was alive. Lenni is allowed to grow and becomes stronger. She becomes a woman in her own right, and not just someone's daughter. Unlike Maya. After just ten minutes you know all there is to know about Stella. Lenni evolves during the course of the film. This is probably the first time I ever immersed myself so totally in my character. I even worked on the way I walk and adopted the rigid gait of an alien. I am quite pleased with myself.

Tell us this film's strong points.

I adore the dark atmosphere of the petrol pump and the rubbish dump. But most especially this film tells a story of lesbian love as if it was a "normal" love story and without the morbid voyeurism that all too often typifies contemporary society. This kind of film is rarely seen in cinema, especially in Italy. I hope gay and lesbian audiences will like the film.

Laura Muscardin attempted something similar with *Giorni – Days*. Is it a coincidence that both films were directed by women?

Perhaps women are better at portraying the sexuality that derives from love than men are.

Did you enjoy shooting the lesbian love scenes with Maya?

It was more embarrassing than shooting a sex scene with a male actor. Maya made it easy because we are friends and knew exactly what was required of these roles. We protected each other. I knew what she wanted and didn't want to do and the same was true for Maya. Of course we were tempted to giggle but kissing a woman's not all that bad: for once you don't get your face scratched by a beard but encounter skin that's as soft as yours. I am heterosexual and very proud of having played a lesbian. I would like to dedicate this film to those people who are discriminated against because of their sexual orientation.

Were you at all influenced by *Thelma and Louise*?

That is one of the films I saw with Monica and Maya. Our real reference points for this film were *Heavenly Creatures* and *Boys Don't Cry*. That is where we got the idea for a film with just a few characters but a strong storyline.

What are your forthcoming projects?

I would like to graduate and then I'd love to make a second film with Paolo Virzì after *Ovosodo*. I love the way he uses his imagination to give his films a literary and political background. He is a director who literally sucks up his actors' souls and that is a wonderful experience.