

# Anișoara

ANA-FELICIA SCUTELNICU

2016

Set against the pastoral backdrop of rural Moldova, Ana-Felicia Scutelnicu's *Anișoara* is a coming-of-age film that follows the young titular protagonist's first encounters with the darker, more painful side of love. Imbued with a sense of longing that rests unsteadily between satisfaction and despair, the film opens with the retelling of a fairytale in which a young princess falls in love with the Sun. When the Sun unintentionally burns his lover in a fiery embrace, he becomes inconsolable, and turns her into a tiny skylark. Every spring, the little skylark flies towards the Sun but falls down every time. This parable of lovesickness becomes central to the film, with apparent references to the folktale present throughout.

*Anișoara* – Scutelnicu's graduation project at the Berlin Film School – is both a beautiful homage to Moldovan folk culture and a striking coming-of-age film that does not shy away from the complexities of its tender, tough, fragile, and determined young lead. Scutelnicu's sophomore feature, the film serves as a continuation of the story and filmmaking techniques first presented in her 2012 debut *Panahida*. That film charted the early adolescence of our protagonist, a diffident, charming village girl named Anișoara (*Anișoara Morari*). Shooting on location with local non-professionals, Scutelnicu proved that it was possible to combine quasi-documentary authenticity with a poetic eye for human drama.

Returning to the same setting and players four years later, the director now traces Anișoara's transition from girlhood to womanhood, the narrative arranged into four chapters corresponding to the seasons of the year, each shot by a different cinematographer in order to produce the necessary stylistic variation. Anișoara lives with her brother, Andrei (*Andrei Morari*), and their grandfather, Petru (*Petru Roșcovan*), her days filled with work but also simple pleasures. The drama is set in motion by her infatuation with newcomer Dragoș (*Dragoș Scutelnicu*), and her encounters with Vasile (*Vasile Brînz*) and a German tourist named Mr Schmidt (*Willem Menne*).

Scutelnicu's intention throughout the film is to show, not tell – and this aim is executed perfectly. With close-up shots of

Anișoara's dazzling blue eyes that carry a weight and maturity beyond her tender years, Scutelnicu tells a story of deep and only dimly understood longing. In the golden rays of a summer afternoon, the inklings of a love triangle appear between Anișoara, Dragoș and Vasile as a few unspoken glances are exchanged over a feast of watermelon. This pivotal encounter both signifies the start of Vasile's bitter estrangement from Anișoara and her increasing closeness to Dragoș; that it plays out without words is indicative of Scutelnicu's adept visual storytelling. Music also plays a part: each season is accompanied by a folk song about longing and loneliness that is most often sung by elderly women, signifying the intergenerational nature of the pain that love leaves in its wake.

In autumn, as Anișoara is courted by the much older Schmidt – an avid bird watcher, it is ultimately revealed that he has come to Moldova as much to find a wife as to pursue his hobby – a folk song about two nesting doves, one old and one young, accompanies the action. Separated by a language barrier and a significant age gap, the German visitor attempts to improve his unfavourable situation by dyeing his grey hair and trimming his beard to appear younger, but is firmly rejected nonetheless by our protagonist, who runs off with a veil that he had brought for the occasion. Scutelnicu shows that the bitterness of love is not exclusive to the young and inexperienced, but is a pain that can reappear in all stages of life.

As the winter drags on, it becomes clear that Anișoara's and Dragoș' relationship has blossomed in the snowy Moldovan hills. But as spring arrives, it is revealed that Dragoș has been away for an extended period of time. When Dragoș returns to the village – with his wife and child – Anișoara is devastated. As she flees, we are reminded of the princess in the painfully prophetic fairytale featured in the opening scenes of the film. The symbolism of the skylark, in keeping with the film's overarching concern with the natural rhythms of rural life, speaks to the essential, intertwined processes of growth, disillusionment, and departure that define young adulthood. As Anișoara disappears over the hill, a skylark dances in the sky overhead.