

# Maria

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By [DEREK ELLEY](#)



**With:** Diana Dumbrava, Horatiu Malaele, Serban Ionescu, Luminita Gheorghiu, Rona Hartner, Florin Calinescu, Ana Ularu, Marinela Chelaru, Cristian Iacob, Magda Catone. (Romanian, English, French, Russian dialogue)

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In 1997, Netzer made a 25-minute, B&W short, based on the same true story and with the same title, that played in more than 20 fests, including Berlin. Current film is dedicated to the real Maria Tiranese, who died in 1995, and whose story has been used as the inspiration for this sad yet at times acidly funny portrait of a people and country — Romania — trying to adjust to post-communist market realities.

Tone is set immediately, with a heavily pregnant Maria (legit actress Diana Dumbrava), walking across a field with her six children. One of her young sons, in goofy glasses and with a disabling gait, spots a rabbit in the undergrowth. “There’s one of my relatives!” he exclaims. “It’s not,” says his weary mom. “So why do they say we breed like rabbits?” asks the tyke.

Coming even before the opening credits, the scene is discombobulating, since the pic’s look is unadorned Balkan realist. Only gradually does “Maria” exert its special spell, made more equivocal by it’s being firmly grounded in the truth about working-class Romania, still paying the price of both the Ceausescu years and post-communist graft.

Only 33, but looking like she’s already lived a lifetime, Maria is married to Ion (Serban Ionescu, who with Dumbrava, won Locarno acting gongs). Recently laid off from a balloon-making factory taken over by a Yank businessman, Ion is a boozier and a gambler who beats Maria. Meanwhile, his pal, Milco (Horatiu Malaele) is always coming up with lunatic moneymaking ideas.

In a deal brokered by a nun, Maria is offered \$5,000 to sell her newest baby to a Frenchman, but she refuses. A kindly neighbor, Mala (Luminita Gheorghiu), is some help, but finally, in desperation, Maria joins a group of truckstop hookers.

Soon, the neighborhood kids are calling her a whore. But when a TV docu program makes her a star, the mayor, in an obvious publicity stunt, offers her a three-room apartment.

Netzer’s free-wheeling direction, along with colorful, Balkan-style playing by the cast surrounding Dumbrava, makes the material into a kind of grim, ironic fairytale, constantly pulling in opposite directions. While Malaele, Ionescu and the rest of the cast (including Rona Hartner as a tough prostie), play up the rough comedy, Dumbrava skillfully downplays Maria as a long-suffering Madonna figure.

Similarly, first-time d.p. Mihail Sarbusca’s lensing, all cold, bilious colors during the day and ochry interiors at night, is invariably undercut by Petru Margineanu’s score, either gentle strings or tinkly piano doodlings. Though the film superficially looks thrown off and ultra-low budget, it’s actually an extremely clever, calculated piece of work.

Maria

Romania-Germany-France

PRODUCTION: An Artis Film (Romania)/Pandora Film (Germany)/Cine Manufacture (France) production, with participation of CNC. (International sales: Pandora, Cologne.) Produced by Karl Baumgartner, Pierre Alain Meier, Adrian Popovici. Executive producer, Cornelia Palos. Directed by Peter Calin Netzer. Screenplay, Gordan Mihici, Netzer.

CREW: Camera (color), Mihail Sarbusca; editor, Melania Oproiu; music, Petru Margineanu; art director-costume designer, Alexandru Zidaru; sound, Constantin Fleancu, Cristian Tarnovetchi; assistant director, Emil Slottea. Reviewed at Locarno Film Festival (competing), Aug. 12, 2003. Running time: 97 MIN.

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