

Central Station

Central Station is the main railway hub for the city of Rio de Janeiro, where retired teacher and professional sourpuss Dora (Fernanda Montenegro) sits at a table writing letters to order for poor—and illiterate--Brazilians to send to family and friends. On the edge of poverty herself, she has long since wearied of the parade of naive and desperate people, and, though she writes down their words, she rarely ever posts their letters—some kind of cruel revenge for her come-down in life.

One customer, eager to reconnect with her son's father in a far-off town, is killed in an accident right in front of the station and her sullen 10-year-old son, Josué (Vinicius de Oliveira), ends up camped out at the station.

Seeing a main chance, Dora first deals the kid to a sleazy adoption broker but then, sensing what his life will be like, she has second thoughts. Dora reclaims the boy and goes on the lam with him with the money she obtained from the deal. The bulk of *Central Station* is their odyssey by bus across the rustic Sertao (the "backlands" of Brazil's Northeast) to find Josué's father. It's a road picture with a distinct Brazilian accent and look.

In their picaresque encounters on the road--with an evangelical bus driver, at a village religious festival, wandering a cookie-cutter new town--the protagonists move through a world which evokes the early Federico Fellini. Fernanda Montenegro even suggests Fellini's muse and wife Giulietta Masina--though considerably weathered--from those earlier Italian films.

This intrepid actress, famed in Brazil for her stage work, shines here as the grump slowly softened by Josué. The bonding between the two is gradual, natural, and real. Ms. Montenegro plays Dora utterly without vanity, her face as lined as a road map of the country routes along which she bounces. It makes her simple act of putting on lipstick at one point that much more charged--she finally is beginning to care how she appears to others.

Central Station won the Golden Bear (Best Film) at the 1998 Berlin Film Festival.

(1998)