

Central Station [15]

1998 Brazil/France

110 mins

UK re-released **15 August 2025**

Director **Walter Salles**

Screenplay **João Emanuel Carneiro; Marcos Bernstein**

Cinematography **Walter Carvalho**

Music **Jaques Morelenbaum; Antonio Pinto**

Cast **Fernanda Montenegro** (Isadora); **Marília Pêra** (Irene); **Vinícius de Oliveira** (Josué) ; **Soia Lira** (Ana) ; **Othon Bastos** (Cezar)

In Walter Salles' "Central Station," a cynical, joyless woman crosses paths with a lonely young boy. There's plenty of room for sentimentality here, but the wonder of Salles' film is all in the telling.

Beautifully observed and featuring a bravura performance by the Brazilian actress Fernanda Montenegro, it gracefully watches these oddly paired characters develop a fractious bond that winds up profoundly changing both of them. Salles' background as a documentary filmmaker also gives this lovely, stirring film a strong sense of Brazil's impoverished rural landscape once its principals take to the road.

Vinicius de Oliveira movingly plays the child named Josue who is foisted by fate onto this irascible older woman. Ms. Montenegro's Dora is a former schoolteacher who earns her living writing letters for the illiterate at the Rio de Janeiro railroad station of the title.

She spends all day listening to the heartfelt thoughts of strangers, writes them down and then makes cruel fun of them when she gets home. After joking about the letters with her kinder friend Irene (Marilia Pera of "Pixote"), Dora never bothers to mail them. Then a letter by Josue's mother permanently alters Dora's world.

With suspicious little Josue in tow, the mother dictates a beseeching letter to her absent husband, then leaves the station and is killed by a bus. Suddenly, the boy knows no one and has no place to go.

Despite her hardened bitterness and obvious loathing for children, Dora grudgingly takes him home. But she has other plans; she wants to sell Josue to an adoption racket and effectively trade him in for a new television set. This scheme subsequently gets Dora into so much trouble that she abruptly decides to leave town. And she agrees to take Josue on a wild goose chase in search of his father, whom the boy says is a carpenter named Jesus. These are the events that send "Central Station" off into the countryside, and take both these hard-bitten travelers into parts unknown.

Salles brings great tenderness and surprise to the events that punctuate this odyssey. By the time the travelers are caught up in a religious pilgrimage, the film has taken on a Felliniesque sense of spiritual discovery.

Ms Montenegro's performance here is superbly modulated as Dora begins rediscovering herself in ways she could never have expected. Though eternally gruff, she finds herself regaining a long-lost faith in life and in the very humanity she scorned when those letter writers came her way.

The film eventually views these strangers' faces in the rapt, joyous spirit that is the story's greatest reward and that becomes Dora's saving grace. And it is the filmmaker's elegant restraint that makes such sentiments so deeply felt. Salles directs simply and watchfully, with an eye that seems to penetrate all the characters who are encountered on Dora's and Josue's journey. His film is also scored with a gentle piano melody that heightens its heartfelt embrace of the world that "Central Station" sees.

Janet Maslin, *New York Times*, 20 November 1998 (abridged)

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