



A YOUNG FRENCH DIRECTOR DEBUTS WITH A BEAUTIFULLY

Since the mid-Eighties, they've just kept coming, these brilliant, audacious French female directors: Claire Denis, Catherine Breillat, Pascale Ferran, Danièle Dubroux, Noémie Lvovsky, Daniele Thompson. Add to their ranks Julie Lopes-Curval, whose bountiful first feature *Seaside* (*Bord de mer*) won the Camera d'Or at Cannes last year.

Set in a less than fashionable beach resort on the Bay of Somme and taking place over the course of a year, *Seaside* includes both locals and summer visitors in its cast of characters. There are about eight leading roles and as many supporting ones, and, as in the plays of Chekhov, which the film resembles in its anti-melodramatic structure and bittersweet tonalities, every character is rich with life. But instead of Chekhov's cluttered dachas and unseen cherry orchards, much of *Seaside* takes place in the open air, and you can feel the sea breezes and the sense of *bonheur* they inspire—even on damp midwinter nights—in just about every shot. Toward the end of the film, a very pregnant young woman in a bright red dress

and a pink sun hat is perched atop a lifeguard stand, a beatific smile on her face. Her husband, a Paris fashion photographer who, with his parents, has spent

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his every summer in this low-key town, asks her what she's doing. "I'm reflecting," she says. "On what?" he asks. "On this place?" she answers. As the only outsider, the pregnant woman is, of course, the stand-in for the filmmaker, whose directorial presence, prior to this single, extremely moving reflexive moment, has been so subtle that we might have overlooked it entirely. At its best, *Sea-*

side bears comparison with Eric Rohmer's sublime *Summer*.

Given the intricate weave of characters and place, it does the film a disservice to describe it through any one narrative thread. But perhaps it's best to begin with Marie (Hélène Fillières), a local twentysomething who works on the sorting line in the pebble-processing factory that is the town's primary industry. Marie lives with Paul (Jonathan Zaccai), who clerks in the supermarket in the winter and serves as a lifeguard in the summer. It's not a promising relationship. Paul is crazy about Marie, but Marie feels trapped by her dead-end job and provincial life. She's sexually attracted to someone who's as restless and discontented as herself—Albert (Patrick Lizana), a manager at the factory, which was founded by his great-grandfather but has recently been taken over by a big corporation. There's a precedent for Albert's involvement with an employee. His father married a sorting line worker, Odette (Liliane Rovère), whose return from London, where she's lived since her husband's death, unsettles not only her son Albert but also Paul's mother, Rose (Bulle Ogier). Girlhood friends, Odette and Rose became estranged when Odette married their boss. Now Rose is retired and in desperate financial straits, having gambled away her savings compulsively playing the slot machine in the local casino. Odette is in a position to help her financially, but Rose is too proud to ask. When the bank repossesses her house, she moves in with Paul and Marie, putting even more strain on their relationship.

Compared with these two intertwined extended families, the summer vacationers—Anne (Ludmila Mikaël), her husband, and their photographer son—seem utterly carefree. But it's Anne, about to become a grandmother and therefore acutely sensitive to time's passage, who experiences the film's most serious crisis of conscience. For