

to a plastic model. Albert Dupontel portrays a middle-aged professional photographer whose marriage has lost its zest. After accidentally coming into possession of a life-size, molded plastic sex doll with the body of a 20-year-old woman, he develops an erotic obsession with the toy. Although the movie doesn't know where to take its premise, it is enough of a jolt just to observe this man-dummy affair being avidly consummated.

The fatal physical temptation explored in "Life Kills Me" is the promiscuous taking of anabolic steroids. In the sad, realistic portrait of two brothers, North African immigrants trying to establish viable careers in a shrinking employment market, the younger brother, a fanatical body-builder who works in strip clubs and peep shows, ravages his body with bulk-enhancing drugs that destroy his liver.

"Demonlover" and "My Idol" imagine a world in which the people who manufacture and create junky pop iconography are spiritually contaminated by their soulless inventions.

"Demonlover," a complicated story of corporate espionage and double-crossing involving the fight for control of a Japanese pornographic Web site, turns into a video game as it goes along. Connie Nielsen is a corporate spy dispatched to sabotage a deal between a multinational conglomerate and an American Internet company, and Chloë Sevigny, in one of her rangiest performances, is her treacherous assistant. The movie's sinister, final destination is an interactive torture Web site called "The Hellfire Club."

"My Idol," a savage social satire whose melodramatic ending comes as a slight letdown, opens with a bracingly nasty parody of a "Jerry Springer"-like show called "Take Out the Tissues," whose object is to humiliate its contestants and reduce them to tears. An eager-beaver assistant on the hit show is flattered to find himself taken up by its sadistic middle-aged producer, who promises him on-air stardom if he will play along with his mind games.

Spirited away to the producer's country house (where he raises carnivorous birds), the young man auditions for the mogul and his depraved, much younger wife to be their personal live-in entertainer and court jester (and her part-time lover). The grueling trial culminates in a drunken, coke-snorting party at which the



François Berléand, Guillaume Canet and Diane Kruger in "My Idol."

aspirant is forced to dress up in a rabbit suit. The moral of the story, which culminates in violence, is forcefully stated: vicious junk-culture phenomena produce vicious people.

For those leery of these cutting-edge films in which so much blood is spilled, the series is also well stocked with satisfying fare that is more conventional. In "Adolphe," Benoît Jacquot's handsomely photographed costume drama adapted from a 19th-century novel by Benjamin Constant, Stanislas Merhar and Isabelle Adjani play passionate lovers whose clandestine affair turns bitter when he falls out of love. As she did so indelibly in the 1975 film "The Story of Adele H," Ms. Adjani, now 47, immerses herself with an almost scary abandon in the role of a Woman Who Loves Too Much.

Nicole Garcia's drama "The Adversary" is a variation on the same tragic true story that inspired Laurent Cantet's "Time Out," a critical favorite last year. In a performance quaking with contained agony, the great French actor Daniel Auteuil plays an unemployed man and the married father of two who poses as a cardiologist for the World Health Organization while living off money his naïve friends and in-laws hand over to him to invest. The ruse explodes in a horrifying bloodbath.

In a lighter vein, Michel Blanc's "See How They Run," based on Joseph Connolly's novel "Summer Things," is a contemporary bedroom farce about two families, one well-to-do, the other in dire financial straits but too ashamed to admit it, who vacation in the same seaside town. There is endless duplicity and plenty of clandestine sex that crosses gen-

erations, along with the elegant, stabilizing presence of Charlotte Rampling.

Julie Lopes-Curval's "Seaside," which was chosen best first film last year at the Cannes International Film Festival, is a more realistic portrait of an unfashionable coastal town on the Bay of Somme and its restless inhabitants that at moments suggests an Eric Rohmer film set on shabbier real estate. Claude Berri's "Housekeeper" is a cool-headed portrait of a November-May relationship between a middle-aged sound engineer and his much younger housekeeper, who throws herself at him, then loses interest.

There are usually a couple of misfires in the Rendez-Vous series, and this year is no exception. Laurent Bouhnik's "24 Hours in the Life of a Woman," a handsome, elaborately constructed screen adaptation of a story by the Austrian novelist Stefan Zweig, wanders back and forth in time without defining a theme or finding an emotional center. Jeanne Labrune's "C'est le Bouquet" is a fussy comedy of tedious verbal hair-splitting and misperception wound around a floral delivery.

For arresting visual beauty, nothing in the series matches Raymond Depardon's black-and-white film "Untouched by the West." Freely adapted from a novel by Diego Brosset, the movie tells the story of an African boy who is adopted by hunters and grows up to be a guide. Its vision of desert tribal people struggling to survive in one of the most hostile climates on earth is, in a word, timeless.

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