

Housekeepers, Bullfighters, Demonlovers

PARDON OUR FRENCH

BY LESLIE CAMHI

FILM

RENDEZ-VOUS WITH FRENCH CINEMA

March 7 through 16, at the Walter Reade

As Francophobia runs rampant through our streets, salons, and media, the Film Society of Lincoln Center's annual series proves yet again that French cinema offers distinctive pleasures, from audacious postmodern spectacles and meticulous period dramas to the most nuanced descriptions of romance and its vicissitudes. To forgo them would be folly.

Former Gamma photographer and renowned documentarian Raymond Depardon steps through colonialism's mirror in the Sahara with *Untouched by the West*, his austere retelling of a turn-of-the-century French officer's novel about a hunter who used all his cunning to resist occupation. Shot in rich black-and-white on the arid plateaus of Chad (and using silent cameras capable of withstanding sandstorms), Depardon's film captures the languorous pace of desert culture, as well as the minimalist beauty and latent menace of the landscape.

Olivier Assayas's visually sumptuous *demonlover* begins as a glossy corporate thriller, with Connie Nielsen and Chloë Sevigny facing off amid the glass-enclosed corridors of a mysterious multinational. Then it flips into a strange tale about Internet porn and the ever-more-permeable boundaries between fantasy and reality, as the characters' identities and motivations (as well as the illusions they labor under) shift almost more quickly than you can follow them. The film's moral message seems skewed but its intelligence and daring are palpable.

Literary adaptations abound. Veteran director Claude Berri's *Housekeeper*, based upon the contemporary novel by Christian Oster, sparkles with the compressed charm of a masterful short story. Jean-Pierre Bacri gives a flawless performance as a sound engineer floundering (with harshly comic dignity) on the edge of midlife depression, after being dumped by his girlfriend (a surprise cameo by director Catherine Breillat). Emilie Dequenne cultivates

an air of tattered insouciance as the girl whom he hires to clean his apartment. Perhaps predictably, youth teaches age a lesson, as her joie de vivre wins out over his curmudgeonly reserve. Yet despite its bitter aftertaste, this rueful film goes down as easily as scotch to the lonely.

For the epic treatment of masculine passivity and romantic ambivalence, try *Adolphe*, Benoit Jacquot's opulent screen version of the 19th-century novel by Benjamin Constant. The author, lover, and intellectual companion to the



OVER THE SAND: JAURIS CASANOVA AND AUDREY BONNET IN *BORD DE MER*

writer Madame de Staël, seems to have channeled several affairs into his portrait of the relationship between a wealthy, brooding young rake (Stanislas Merhar) and the mistress of a provincial baron (a still radiant Isabelle Adjani), a mother of two and 10 years his senior, whom he frivolously seduces and then finds impossible to abandon. Jacquot's sensual approach to language and coolly aristocratic visual style convey Constant's remarkably lucid delineations of a passion whose decline is entirely anticipated.

The French system of state financing for film continues to support emerging women directors, as several auspicious debuts in this series make clear. Julie Lopes-Curval's *Bord de Mer* is perhaps the most accomplished. Winner of the Camera d'Or at Cannes last year, this simple tale about the year-round inhabitants of a once-fashionable seaside resort is permeated with a Chekhovian melancholy. Bulle Ogier delivers a tough and touching performance as an aging gambler; Hélène Fillière plays the town's prettiest girl, who dreams of elsewhere. Striking, pared-down camerawork and elliptical dialogue convey the characters' sense of isolation and longing.

Delphine Gleize's *Carnages* is the most whimsical. Using interlocking plots, the film follows multiple characters across France and Spain who receive different pieces of a 1000-pound Andalusian bull that died in the ring. Gleize's orchestration of this choral narrative is impressive, but her film suffers from an excess of cuteness, and its convoluted structure prevents us from entering any of its stories too deeply.

Finally, Marina de Van's *In My Skin* is undoubtedly the goriest. De Van wrote, directed, and stars in this semi-autobiographical horror film about a young woman whose life is just coming together—exciting job and live-in boyfriend on the horizon—when she accidentally gashes her leg, and discovers a passion for cutting herself. De Van shows us too much, but this satire of alienation is at times insightful and grimly hilarious. **V**

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