

ely film society : the notes

april 2015

latest news

Your committee has now selected twelve more films for next season, starting with *The Smallest Show On Earth* (a comedy from 1957 starring Peter Sellers) on 15th June. Be sure to renew your membership and bring your friends, the choice is as wide-ranging as ever. We also have a market stall on Saturday 2nd May, so come past and say hello to us - all the details of the new season will be there.

Diva

Jean-Jacques Beineix, France 1981

From the novel *Diva* [1979] by Delacorta (Daniel Odier) adapted by Jean-Jacques Beineix and Jean Van Hamme

Music Vladimir Cosma
Cinematography.... Philippe Rousselot

Wilhelmenia Wiggins Fernandez Cynthia Hawkins

Frédéric Andréi Jules
Richard Bohringer Gorodish
Thuy An Luu Alba
Jacques Fabbri

Commissaire Jean Saporta
Chantal Deruaz Nadia
Anny Romand Paula
Roland Bertin

Simon Weinstadt, l'imprésario
Gérard Darmon L' Antillais
Dominique Pinon Le curé
Jean-Jacques Moreau Krantz
Patrick Floersheim Zatopek
Raymond Aquilon
Abdullah, le rasta

It all begins with an opera. The final work by the none-too-renowned composer Alfredo Catalani from a now-forgotten German novel set in the Tyrolean Alps, *La Wally* premiered at La Scala in 1892. Even by the inflated Belle Epoque aesthetic of the time it was implausibly hokey and sank almost without trace, leaving just one lovelorn aria, *Ebben? Ne andrò lontana*, for the soprano repertoire. "The opera features a memorable operatic death in which the heroine throws herself into an avalanche. It is seldom performed, partly because of the difficulty of staging this scene", says the Wikipedist, with a straight face.

No kidding. But for stunts, Belle Epoque stylings and lashings of implausible hoke it is hard to beat *Diva*, the film from a pulp thriller novel (part of a series with linked characters) which launched the *cinema du look* on an international audience and remains its enduring cult classic three decades on.

An opera star has managed to build a stellar career without once being recorded. At a concert her devoted young fan Jules (Frederic Andrei), a postman with a taste for the finer pleasures of the single life, smuggles in a tape deck to bootleg her performance of the Catalani



aria, something noted by two slick gangsters in matching mirror shades sitting in the row behind. Elsewhere, two plainclothes police hacks witness a street murder of a prostitute with a damaging tale to tell of corruption and pimping at the highest level, also committed to tape and dropped unnoticed in the young postman's moped pannier. From this slender premise unspools that most robust of genres, the Parisian caper movie, as rounds of cross and double-cross, bait and switch, upstairs and downstairs and even through the Metro (quite the most athletic escalator chase scene you will ever see) ensue across town. Who's got the tape? Who wants the tape? Which tape even? Who's the villain? Who's the hero? Everyone knows nearly nothing, but one man knows just about everything, and round his invincible dark cool rotates a carousel of brightly-lit mayhem.

Cinema du look was the new brash punks of French cinema tweaking the noses of their New Wave mentors. Gone was the Marxist politics and flick-knife editing: in came shameless ego, an obsession with the sheen and fetish of material objects, bursts of frenetic activity for its own pleasure. The pairs of gangsters are a long remove from the cool snap-brimmed *escrocs* of Jean-Pierre Melville's grimy thrillers, while Gorodish (the magnificently lizard-like Richard Bohringer), the philosopher-thug who tugs the strings and repeatedly bails out the hapless Jules from his perils, lives in a black-painted atelier with a rollerskating Vietnamese muse, delivers homilies on the zen of toast and devotes seemingly weeks



Beineix and Bohringer on the set of *Diva*

to completing a giant jigsaw to the sound of Tibetan monk drones. French self-regard is celebrated, surface and appearance rule: a ceaseless cinematographic pattern of blue and red, interiors awash with bricolage, grand carved stone buildings and arch references to high-end brand names.

And yet, and yet... In turning away from the stifling gentility of *le cinema du papa* in the 1950s, New Wave auteurs such as Truffaut and Rohmer anointed Alfred Hitchcock



as their hero: a generation on, the lineaments are still there in *Diva*. The chases evoke the tensions in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, the toweringly silly plotlessness is straight out of *North By Northwest* (with Bohringer a pleasing riposte to the James Mason figure), lit by neon splashes of the paranoia that propels *Vertigo*. The characters almost know how futile their place in the scheme of things really is. "Here we're into disaster, luxurious disaster" says one. "Order. That's all that counts. **Order!**" spits a gangster at a climactic moment. No kidding.

And in the final act... the false hero appears in a white suit, the true hero appears in an even whiter one after some chicanery involving a fleet of vintage white Citroens. Villains meet suitably grisly ends, tapes change hands, chaste passions (no sex here, for all the reliance on prostitution as a motif) are required, and loose ends

tied up. With a final postmodern flourish, we surface into an empty theatre, its walls stripped, for a confession and a burst of echoing applause from yet another tape deck. Truly operatic from end to end: you almost expect to see Mr Hitchcock himself with his hand on the stop button.

After *Diva*, Beineix went on to make the altogether more psychologically troubling *Betty Blue* [1986]. Other features followed but his recent

career has been in TV documentary. His place as the upstart was taken by Luc Besson whose influential trio of *Subway* [1985, also starring Bohringer], *Nikita* [1990] and *Leon* [1994] took *cinema du look* into more raucous and cartoonish territory. *Diva* now sits stranded as a magnificent vain artefact of its time and place, a young talent's calling card, but also as a harbinger of the new directions cinema was to take in the coming decades.

**NEXT MONTH'S FILM IS
THE EXTERMINATING
ANGEL**
(Luis Buñuel, Spain 1962)
Monday 18 May

*Preceded by a brief
AGM of the Society*

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