

'Dreamlife' offers excellent tale

Foreign film paints fine portrait of two women

BY SAMUEL MCKEWON
Editor

There is, in the realm of modern day film, room for everything. And a good deal of the medium's finest works resides beyond American shores.

"The Dreamlife of Angels," the third effort from French director Erick Zonca, proves such a notion. A wholly European feel resonates through this stunning, beautiful, strangely mesmerizing film. Playing at Mary Riempa Ross Thursday-Sunday this weekend, it's as good anything produced in the United States recently this side of "Affliction."

And like "Affliction," the movie carries with it two haunting performances from its two leads, Elodie Bouchez, who plays Isa, and Natacha Regnier, who plays Marie. Both shared the best actress prize at the 1998 Cannes Film Festival, and for good reason. With their full-bodied performances, they make recent Academy Award winners Gwyneth Paltrow and Helen Hunt seem a little trivial.

Still, it seems unlikely that such a film, which follows squatters Isa and Marie through a few months of their

lives in a French flat, would be found worthwhile by an American studio. Such is our mentality that emotion and soul take a back seat to style and wit.

"Dreamlife" starts easy enough, with backpacker Isa in the streets of Lille, France, as she finds work out of need, not want, wandering from selling cards to a sewing job she quickly gets fired from. There, she finds a feisty, equally young best friend in Marie (Regnier).

Marie watches a flat for a woman who died in a car accident. Isa stays with her. And at first, both young women display kindred souls. Slowly, the movie reveals their differences through their interactions with men and those around them.

Zonca allows those differences to play out amongst the strength of his actresses. Marie has an outer toughness protecting a emotional cynicism that ultimately tears her apart when she strikes a intense sexual relationship with a rich club owner Chriss (Gregoire Colin), who could care less for her.

Isa, the bright, caring stronger girl with chewed-up hair and goofy smile, knows it and calls Marie to the truth. It is there the friendship begins to waver.

Another element of the movie is Isa's visits with a young comatose girl

who was also involved in the car accident. These visits form the foundation of Isa's personae and Bouchez's characterization of her. Awkward and a bit shunned at the outset, Bouchez lets us in on a woman capable of great compassion and love, as well as an awareness for the need of other people.

Ultimately, it is this image of Isa's love and responsibility that stands out the most in the film. When she says, "I'm staying," to one character, she means it, and we find out one scene later what staying means for not only Isa, but the character, too. The emotions roar.

Regnier's performance of woman burned by love and her past is equally as moving. There is a moment when she is with Chriss, the first time, and she knows what he wants. There is no lower feeling in the film. Regnier plays humiliation very well.

The film is written beautifully, as well, sans witty dialogue and filled simple, honest passages. Bouchez and Regnier are perfect together in every

scene, creating a relationship drawn together by class structure and torn apart by ideals. It becomes simple, really: where Isa has strength in people, Marie does not.

To his credit, Zonca never makes a statement about their way of life or the political realities of these women. Rather, he brings values to the forefront, a rare thing in American cinema. Subtly, he shows us the failure in men to confront, the weakness in women to submit. These are not uncommon themes in film, but often thrown away. Most movies opt for the quick turn of a phrase and verbal titillation.

The written word even takes shape here, a little used concept. It works beautifully here, as some of

"Dreamlife's" most powerful messages are contained within those scenes. A feeling for the soul: rarely has it been captured as it is here.

The movie is not for every American viewer, especially those who are not engaged by female-driven dramas or developing emotional journeys. Those who are not, stay away: "The Dreamlife of Angels" will bore you, as would most artistic films. As another European classic, "Persona," is one of my favorite films, I mind neither of the aforementioned traits, but embrace them.

"The Dreamlife of Angels" is one of those rare, beautifully moving gems; a reward for anyone who loves good cinema, especially that of which originates overseas.

The Facts

Title: "The Dreamlife of Angels"
Stars: Elodie Bouchez, Natacha Regnier
Director: Erick Zonca
Rating: R (sexual content)
Running Time: 2:00 (120 minutes)
Grade: A
Five Words: Beautiful, moving film near perfection



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