

## Cezanne and I

France has much to celebrate for its remaking of European art and culture in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> C., especially in the plastic arts from Courbet to Monet and beyond. The new film “Cezanne and I” (*Cezanne et Moi*) personalizes a segment of that fecund period with a lovely reimagining of the life-long friendship between perhaps the greatest French painter of that epoch, Paul Cezanne, and the ground-breaking novelist Emile Zola. The film, written and directed by Danièle Thompson (“Jet Lag”), honors both the two artists and the world they moved in.

The film opens with a fateful meeting between the two giants in Zola’s handsome country manse in 1888, the year their friendship foundered when Zola wrote a novel negatively depicting his old comrade. From that framing device, the action shifts to their lengthy backstory, starting with their grammar school days in 1852 in Aix-en-Provence. Their mutual struggle to succeed as artists is traced through time, jumping from the 1860’s, when they were forming their own styles, into the 1870’s and 1880’s when they were forging their mature works.

In every scene between them, we observe them in searching and contending conversations about their art and lives (hey, these guys are Frenchmen after all). These conversations reveal both their affection for one another as well as their native contentiousness. Zola (Canet) is the intellect, sooth but sardonic, yet with an open heart, especially for the French working classes he writes about. Meanwhile, Cezanne (Guillaume Gallienne) is all intuition, cantankerous and bold, rejecting the painting of the staid *Academie* to pursue his own visions.

Over time, Zola becomes a “great man,” a best-selling author who lives a bucolic bourgeois life in the Paris suburb of Médan with his conventional wife Alexandrine (Alice Pol) and a favorite mistress Jeanne (Freya Mavor)). Cezanne, though from a well-off provincial family (his distant father runs a family bank), sells almost nothing, lives with his mistress/wife Hortense (Déborah François), and continues to depend on his parents, even as he re-envision the standard subjects of painting, portraiture, still life, and landscape. How that varied economic dynamic tests their bond is also limned in “Cezanne et Moi.”

The film is essentially a reverie of the men’s relationship with a gorgeous backdrop of the French countryside that surrounds them, evoking a brace of famous French paintings by stalwarts such as Manet, Pissaro, Renoir, among others. None of this imagery is more telling, however, than when Cezanne happens upon a sight of Montagne Sainte-Victoire in Aix, a mountain landscape he made his own in many works. His rapt coming upon it in the middle of the film could be seen as a facile movie version of “inspiration,” but for this viewer it works wonderfully, particularly if you know the artist’s oeuvre.

Thompson’s script is tart about the artists’ work. In the petulant scene of the break-up, Emile chides Paul by exclaiming “You don’t read my books anymore; you judge them,” (and by extension, the writer), while Cezanne counters that Zola has become “merely a voyeur.” Earlier, Cezanne’s long-suffering Hortense reproaches the

painter for “lavishing your love on the canvas” rather than upon her. She adds: “there is more humanity in his apples than in his eyes.”

This is a film of *bon mots* and bon “shots.”  
(*The film is rated “R” and runs 117 mins.*)

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