

Eight Women

Murder most foul at an isolated country house...classic 1950's frocks and suits on parade...all awash with romantic pop music? Agatha Christie dressed in Chanel and singing Françoise Hardy? These are attempts to describe a new, odd (though thoroughly engaging) genre-bending French frappe called *8 Women* ("8 Femmes").

Besides style plus, this new farce, directed by François Ozon, boasts eminent star power by featuring major French film actresses of the last several decades, among them Catherine Deneuve, Fanny Ardant, Isabelle Huppert, Emmanuelle Béart, young Virginie Ledoyen, and, representing classic Gallic cinema, Danielle Darrieux (85 years old when this film was made). Watching all these ladies contend and clash in a giddy whodunnit is delicious.

The murder is revealed in the first minutes: in his fine stone country chateau, Marcel (the only male in the film whose face is never seen and who doesn't have a line) is discovered done in with a knife in his back. Living in the house are his haughty wife Gaby (Deneuve), her mother Mamy and old-maid sister Augustine (Darrieux and Huppert, respectively), and her youngest daughter, the teenaged Katherine (Ludivine Sagnier). Just home from school is sweet and sensible Suzon (Ledoyen). Serving this passel of queens are the new chambermaid Louise (Béart) and the long-time cook Chanel (Firmine Richard). There has been an overnight snowstorm, the car won't start, then the telephone line is cut, and the estate's gate is locked. They are all totally isolated from the outside world, and they are, of course, all suspects.

To add just one last piquant ingredient to this female French sauce, Marcel's sister, the worldly Pierrette (Ardant), shows up just before the phone line is cut and the gate is sealed, adding her lascivious persona to an already volatile recipe.

The plot is classic whodunnit mechanics, with all manner of secrets revealed along the way and all kinds of motives exposed (Gaby was going to leave Marcel, Mamy has had her precious bonds stolen, Louise has had an affair with the dead man, Suzon has a bun in the oven, somebody's paternity is in question, etc., etc.). It's a witchfest, a bitches brew, a catfight, all amid day-glo colors and crinoline skirts.

And did I mention the musical numbers? Just to confound you the more, at evenly-spaced intervals in the film, each of the eight women delivers a song, each one designed to reveal something of her own character—if not her murder motive. While I don't know enough about French popular music to tell, I sense the tunes are all familiar French pieces, and each one is actually sung solo by the actresses themselves. They range from a bouncy "Papa, You're Not With It" delivered by the young Katherine through a lament from the pining Chanel to a down-and-dirty strip number, "Liberated Girl," from Pierrette.

If all this sounds way too precious, it is, but played as almost Wildean farce, it works fine. Of course, who actually dunnit hardly matters in the end; it's the kinky relationships revealed along the way that keep you guessing and amused.

As much fun as sorting out the relationships is watching this bevy of actresses ham it up. The two youngest girls prove both spoiled and smart, earnest and engaging. The servants are a striking contrast, the lonely Chanel, who harbors unrequited feelings for the lady of the house, and the lusty Louise, whose long black leather boots belie her demure white cap. Richard as the former and Béart as the latter convey precisely the

lugubriousness of the cook and the wantonness of the maid. Huppert, one of the greatest serious film actresses of our day, is probably the funniest of the lot as the thwarted, prune-dry spinster who, at the end, gets one great make over. Then there is Darrieux, radiant and sharp in her eighth decade, and quite touching when she sings, near the end, of the impossibility of love.

And there is no getting around it: the divas Deneuve (at almost 60), and Ardant (over 50), are still stunning creatures. I mentioned catfights above: for those old enough to have seen these two grande dames perform over the last 35 years, it will come as a revelation to see them as mortal enemies, Gaby and Pierrette, flailing into each other, then rolling on the floor in their tightly-fitted designer suits, only to end up—as might happen in any corny romantic drama—face-to-face in a furious embrace that ends...in a long, lingering kiss. Whoa! Is this postmodern or what?

This kind of bending of the staid conventions of the mystery genre is very much on the mind of the director, the lively Ozon. From the first frame, he tries to put a knowing spin on his creation, using the past to comment on his very contemporary women. The credit sequence, for example, with a different massive flower announcing each cast member, directly invokes the standard Hollywood Fifties romance. In directing his charges, he keeps the ladies' gestures large and histrionic—they could be Lana Turner or Jane Wyman swishing around in some Warner Brothers Technicolor drama. The clothes, the décor, the music—all call up a certain cinematic past but do it with a studied wink. Rather silly, yes, kind of garish, perhaps, but *8 Women* contains many real charms, too.

(October 2002)