

Marguerite

An advanced case of cluelessness characterizes “Marguerite,” an puzzling but genuinely touching French film co-written and directed by Xavier Giannoli. The film was “inspired by” the life of the infamous American opera singer wannabe, Florence Foster Jenkins, a musically inept but ever hopeful singer who organized her life around a talent she did not possess. The Jenkins figure here is Marguerite Dumont (Catherine Frot), a French baroness in the early 1920’s who aims to enchant listeners with her money and position, if not her voice.

Filthy rich and married to a penniless baron Georges (André Marcon), Marguerite sponsors a charity salon at her mansion outside Paris where she gets to wretchedly perform arias before a high-toned audience paid to indulge her. A young critic Lucien (Sylvain Dieuaide) sneaks into a performance and writes a precious—though not negative—review, which Marguerite willfully embraces as recognition for her to finally perform in public.

No one she knows, beginning with her husband and their entire household staff, headed by the enigmatic Madelbos (Denis Mpunga), ever tells her the truth about her voice which she steadfastly believes in, even after she is urged by Lucien and his poet friend Kyrill (Aubert Fenoy), to participate in a scandalous anarchic cabaret, an event that closes down her salon. She continues to be strung along, even submitting to voice lessons from a failing tenor, Pezzini (Michel Fau), and his quirky entourage, all living high off her largess. The training feeds her dream: a public recital at a downtown theater, a debut that caps the picture.

To look at, “Marguerite” is ravishing, a beautifully constructed period piece with lavish attention paid to lavish living (mostly shot in the Czech Republic). The vocal sound track, too, can be entrancing, peppered with excerpts from Purcell, Handel, Delibes, Leoncavallo, and Vivaldi, *inter alia*. The entrancement stops, however, wherever Marguerite sings, her grating voice testing the ears (a performer named Virginie Gattino pulls off expertly the act of singing badly so well).

The agonizing emissions from Marguerite are the more emotive because of the wonderfully poignant performance by Mme. Frot, who won a Cesar (the French equivalent of a Oscar) for this role. Frot is the perfect foil for a world dissembling before her, her open, round face with downturned eyes dreaming a dream that cannot be fulfilled. In some ways, “Marguerite” wants to be a comedy, but, while there are a few laughs, this story of a sweet but unhinged obsession with music is mostly heartbreaking. (*The film is rated “R” and runs 129 min.*)

(March 2016)