

Belle De Jour

Washington film fans can now re-visit a modern classic: *Belle de Jour*, one of the most honored movies of the 1960's, combines as few others and unremitting elegance with the puzzle of human passions. Thoughtfully revived by film director/film buff Martin Scorsese, the film--in a new, limpid print--is as classy and complex as it ever was.

Belle de Jour, originally released in 1967, was to have been the last film by the famed Spanish director Luis Buñuel. After it won the Golden Lion at Venice that year, Mr. Buñuel had second thoughts and figured he might have more films in him (he went on to make five more, his last in 1978). *Belle de Jour* achieved almost unanimous critical acclaim, critics calling it "seamless and lucid" and Buñuel's "most accomplished, free-flowing work." As for the master himself, he modestly attributed the film's critical and commercial success "more to the marvelous whores than to my direction."

For those coming fresh to *Belle de Jour*, the basic premise is facile: a beautiful, bored surgeon's wife who has everything is frigid (there are flashbacks of childhood abuse) but becomes fascinated enough with a stylish brothel to join its ranks, but only as an afternoon delight (her working name is "Beauty by Day," the film's title). Thereby, she becomes sexually liberated by a young gangster Marcel (Pierre Clementi), among others. While she ends up a warmer mate, her involvement with Marcel leads to disaster for husband Pierre (the absurdly handsome Jean Sorel). Stated so baldly, it sounds like the premise of a hundred porn films, some coarse kind of *Pauline Does Paris*. The wonder of Buñuel's film--which he and co-scenarist Jean-Claude Carriere adapted from a 1929 novel by Joseph Kessel--is how *uncoarse* he makes this whole enterprise (while rated "R" for mature subject matter and some nudity, it is always exquisitely tasteful) and the rich fantasy life he gives his heroine, Séverine Sérizy.

Séverine is played by Catherine Deneuve at her ice maiden best. With her eyes at half-mast, her face flawless, and parading an Yves San Laurent wardrobe, she never looked better--and perhaps less likely to join a Parisian brothel! What is amazing about the film is that Buñuel makes you believe in her wanting to transgress yet not understanding why. Perhaps Kessel and Buñuel are only resuscitating here the old (male) fantasy of women aching to be whores, but it's more complex than that. We see, instead, one specific woman, Séverine, taken into this tawdry life (which never seems at all tawdry) and somehow finding herself enriched. Sex with men she doesn't know seems to heighten her love for her (apparently perfect) husband. When she encounters a client she knows (the smooth Michel Piccoli), the game is over; you can't just go to bed with someone you *know*!

Luis Buñuel is a crafty old codger here, but he started out as a wild surrealist, a buddy of Dali, a raker of dreams. And he conjures up surreal material aplenty through his protagonist's dreams and fantasies. The film opens with one, with Séverine and her husband riding a coach through gorgeous woods. When she spurns his attempt at love-making, she is, with the coachmen's help, roused from the wagon, dragged across a field, tied up and whipped, humiliated. Odd as this sounds, this sequence--never quite real--is very funny. My preview audience--mostly young people who were probably coming to the film for the first time--was laughing out loud. The kicker then comes when Séverine's day-dreaming ends to show her real, impassive face, while her husband asks: "What are thinking about?" You know you are in the power of a master here who

will keep you guessing till the end.

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