

The Girl on the Train

The new French film by André Téchiné is an intriguing fiction based on a true incident, the “RER D Affair” of 2004, wherein a young woman—who was not Jewish—falsely claimed she was the victim of an anti-Semitic attack by a gang of thugs on a Paris morning train. The director (he also co-wrote the screenplay) uses that case, one of the most polarizing in recent French history, and makes it his own, basically a character study of a young woman, Jeanne Fabre (Emilie Dequenne), uncertain about what to do with her life.

“The Girl on the Train” is divided into two chapters, “The Circumstances,” which sets up Jeanne’s life with her widowed mother Louise (an appropriately frumpy Catherine Deneuve), her fitful search for employment, and her involvement with an assertive young wrestler, Franck (the sleek Nicolas Duvauchelle). Her willingness to go along with what Franck wants, her passivity in general, almost gets her implicated in a sordid drug scheme.

Then, in “The Consequences,” Jeanne, in a fit of pique, inattention, or what-have-you, concocts her victimhood, marking her belly with a swastika, cutting her face, and lying baldly to the police. She appears unaware of what the reaction will be, but a predictable media storm results, and her mother’s old flame, prominent lawyer Samuel Bleistein (Michel Blanc), agrees to sequester Jeanne and Louise at his country house until the storm can be ridden out. Soon, Jeanne’s story is easily exposed by Louise, Samuel, even the Bleistein’s grandson, Nathan (Jeremy Quaegebeur), and she must accept arrest and eventual probation.

What is intriguing, and worthwhile trying to decipher, is Jeanne’s motivation: what makes her so passive, so accepting on one hand, then acting so melodramatically and strangely? The wonder of Ms. Dequenne’s performance is that you believe her, whatever she does, because she has such a fresh-faced--if empty-headed—approach to life. And she faces much of her world, it turns out, on rollerblades, both a symbol of her frisky, ebullient persona, as well as her adolescent, unthinking one. She keeps you guessing, right up to the end.

(The film runs 105 minutes and is not rated.)

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