

My Favorite Season

Sporting French film icons like Catherine Deneuve (*Belle de Jour*, *Indochine*) and Daniel Auteil (*Jean de Florette*, *Un Coeur en Hiver*) and crafted by hot director André Téchiné--the film *My Favorite Season* ("Ma Saison Préférée") must be one of those stylish, sensuous *histoires sentimentales* zat only zee French can make, non? Well, no. This film is rather a story of siblings and family; of how people just cannot live together--but somehow must.

Mr. Téchiné (*Wild Reeds*) has brought off a serious--but not too serious--study of a sister and brother who were inordinately close as youngsters but who, as adults, have drifted apart, only to be thrown together by the imperatives of family business.

Emilie (Deneuve) is a public notary who shares an office in a town near Toulouse with her notary husband, Bruno (Jean-Pierre Bouvier). Her younger brother Antoine (Auteil) is a confirmed bachelor and noted neurologist who lives in the city. After their widowed mother Berthe (Marthe Villalonga) has a stroke at her isolated farmhouse, the two must come together for the first time in three years to deal with the blunt old woman--who definitely does *not* wish to share either of their relatively cosmopolitan lives.

A Christmas dinner reunion aimed to reconcile turns into a disaster. After returning to the farm, Mama has another stroke. Her children eventually place her in a distressing home--then she must enter the hospital... Through all the stress, Emilie finds her marriage to be stale and stalled; she leaves her husband and two grown children to stay in town. Antoine--who has always adored his sister--is thrilled to be with her again, yet cannot show how thrilled he really is. The film hints of a passionate childhood shared by the two but is ambiguous about its intimacy. They fight, they fence, they testily dip into their past. It's all very jerky, very life-like, very real.

Téchiné achieves his slice-of-life style through improvisation in his scenes and spontaneity in his camera work; he has said about *My Favorite Season* that his favorite scenes are those "stolen in the act." The filmgoer senses that, too, often feeling he has blundered into the intimate heart of a small tribe. Some of the world weariness the characters evince echoes of Michelangelo Antonioni's epics of ennui in the early 1960's (*L'avventura*, *La Notte*), but Téchiné's touch is more Gallic than the great Italian, meaning lighter, airier, untouched by doom.

Téchiné's two leads, doing their dance of irritation and affection, are impeccable. This is *not* the Catherine Deneuve of the Chanel ads. As Emilie, she is all business and propriety, elegant but chilly, a woman who feels the spirit ebbing from her life. This is no icy glamour queen, but an artist depicting the struggle of a soul. Auteil's Antoine, of scientific bent yet impulsive, can be caustic and cruel, yet he also pulls off the funniest scenes in the film, those where he rehearses his behavior while poised on a toilet seat. Both actors embody precisely their characters' mutual attraction and repulsion, the push-me-pull-you nature of their relationship. These are rich performances full of nuance and truth.

And they are not the only ones. The cast is strong throughout, and specifically worthy of a mention is Villalonga as the opinionated Berthe. Set in her ways, critical

about everything, this character can hardly be seen as sympathetic, yet Villalonga makes the mother fully comprehensible as a life-long rustic who simply cannot stomach urban life. As sweet as Mama is sour is young Chiara Mastroianni as Anne, the daughter of Emilie and Bruno, who is troubled by her parent's breakup. Mastroianni (the daughter of Ms. Deneuve and Marcello Mastroianni) fashions her character of equal parts intelligence and wit, shyness and uncertainty.

The film exhibits minor flaws: the dialogue occasionally falls into windy *bons mots*, and there is a desultory and unnecessary intimation of rape. For people bothered by such matters, it should be said that *My Favorite Season* does not really resolve its interpersonal dilemmas, though there are hints of hope and civility at its denouement. For those who might wince at its length (it runs just over two hours), I can only say that the protagonists are worth the time it takes to get to know them.

One odd thing about this film's appearance: it was released in France in mid-1993. Why on earth does it take three years for a film of this quality to make it to American screens? Are U.S. distributors that chary of presenting "difficult" foreign language films to jaded American cinema-goers? Sadly to this observer, American audiences do seem to be less interested in foreign films as the years go by--this late arrival is one more small evidence of it.

(The film is not rated, but does contain some sexual situations, minor nudity, and French oaths.)

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