



## Hadewijch

By JUSTIN CHANG

**Bruno Dumont, one of French cinema's reigning pessimists, suspends his punishing view of mankind — at least momentarily — with “Hadewijch,” an austere, deeply questioning examination of a devout young woman having an intense crisis of faith. Less harsh and forbidding than the auteur's recent work, yet played with the same deadly seriousness, the film is exquisitely molded, dramatically parched and entirely sincere, perhaps to a fault, while its engagement with both Christianity and Islam supplies a rich, potentially divisive talking point for fall festgoers. Dumont's followers will need no exhortation to climb aboard, but new arthouse converts look unlikely.**

“Hadewijch” takes its name from a 13th-century Christian mystic who, in her writings, extolled the adoration of God over worldly, romantic love. Dumont has conceived his protagonist, Celine (newcomer Julie Sokolowski), as a latter-day Hadewijch — a 20-year-old theological student whose commitment to Christ is so extreme that she's cast out of her convent by an alarmed Mother Superior, who urges her to find her calling in the outside world.

Viewers hoping that Celine's calling might involve singing moppets and lederhosen have probably never seen a Dumont film before. Yet mercifully, “Hadewijch” mostly rejects the repellent man-as-bestial-predator worldview that suffocated “Flanders” and “Twentynine Palms,” allowing for a more nuanced, intelligent view of human thought, behavior and spirituality that's borderline generous by the helmer's standards.

Shortly after moving back in with her (fairly clueless) upper-crust parents, pretty, soft-spoken Celine befriends an Arab youth, Yassine (Yassine Salime), who's clearly attracted to her. Gently but with increasing firmness, Celine rebuffs Yassine's clumsy advances, claiming a vow of lifelong chastity. “I'm in love with God,” she says simply, and it's the nature of that devotion — elusive, ineffable yet powerfully possessive — that is Dumont's subject.

In a surprising development, Celine forms a stronger bond with Yassine's older brother, Nassir (Karl Sarafidis), a passionate Muslim who nonetheless seems uniquely capable of understanding Celine's dilemma: the challenge of remaining faithful to a God who seems to have vanished from the world around her. Their scenes together, in which Dumont negotiates a tricky detente between two opposing faiths, are by far the film's most moving, written and acted with unusual delicacy, and shot by d.p. Yves Cape (“Flanders,” “L'Humanite”) in tight closeups that come across as searching rather than confrontational.

From here, the film unexpectedly shifts to a brief interlude in the Middle East (shot in Lebanon, though the location is unspecified onscreen), where the spectacle of everyday violence catalyzes a decisive shift for Celine, possibly into madness. A shocking incident

follows but is quickly called into question by a rain-soaked coda, which echoes the ending of “Flanders” in its all-too-fleeting suggestion of redemption.

Admirers of Dumont’s unyielding aesthetic won’t be disappointed by the film’s deliberate pacing, naturalistic performances (by non-pro thespians) and stately compositions framing the French countryside. Still, for all its formal beauty and uncompromising high-mindedness, “Hadewijch” never lends Celine’s crisis the kind of harrowing moral urgency the Dardenne brothers achieve in their dramas, which are just as invested in matters of the soul but nowhere near as ponderously weighty.

Dumont’s invocation of terrorism in an otherwise peaceable Muslim context will strike some as bold, others as offensive and uninformed. Equally problematic is the script’s treatment of a key secondary character, a lowly ex-con (David Dewaele) whom editor Guy Lecorne cuts to periodically, but always as an afterthought; how this thread dovetails with Celine’s odyssey feels unconvincing and almost arrogant in its God-like manipulation of the characters.

Sokolowski’s angelic countenance and lack of actorly finesse suit her character well, but there’s a lingering opacity that keeps full identification at bay. Apart from her disavowal of sex, Celine’s fervor doesn’t seem to have much practical application to her life (when Yassine steals a motorcycle in a fit of rebellious anger, you wonder why she does so little to protest).

While Dumont typically shuns music, “Hadewijch” makes sparing, dramatically appropriate use of choral selections including Bach’s “Passion of St. Matthew” and Caplet’s “Le Miroir de Jesus,” and is all the warmer for it.

Yves Cape; editor, Guy Lecorne; production designer, Jean-Marc Tran; costume designers, Annie Morel-Paris, Alexandra Charles; sound (Dolby Digital), Philippe Lecoœur, Emmanuel Crozet; visual effects supervisor, Francois Vagnon; casting, Dumont, Claude Debonnet. Reviewed at Toronto Film Festival (Special Presentations), Sept. 11, 2009. (Also in New York Film Festival; San Sebastian Film Festival — competing.) Running time: 105 MIN. (French, Arabic dialogue)