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Film Reviews

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Berlin

Camille Claudel 1915

(France)

By GUY LODGE

A Wild Bunch presentation of a 3B Prods. production, in association with Arte France Cinema, CRRAV Nord Pas-de-Calais, Le Fresnoy, Studio National des Arts Contemporains. Produced by Jean Brehat, Rachid Bouchareb, Muriel Merlin. Directed, written by Bruno Dumont.

With Juliette Binoche, Jean-Luc Vincent, Robert Leroy, Emmanuel Kauffman, Marion Keller, Armelle Leroy-Rolland, Myriam Allain, Regine Gayte, Nicole Faurite, Eric Jacoulet, Florence Philippe, Christelle Petit, Sandra Rivera, Claire Payrade, Alexandra Lucas, Daniele, Jessica Herrero, Myriam Laloum, Christiane Blum.

The idea of severe French formalist Bruno Dumont taking on a costume biopic, and with a major star in the lead to boot, initially seemed an aberration, perhaps the auteur equivalent of Dylan going electric. As it turns out, "Camille Claudel 1915," a measured, moving account of a brief period in the later life of the troubled sculptress, could hardly be the work of anyone else, with its sparseness of technique and persistent spiritual curiosity. Juliette Binoche's mesmerizing lead turn may earn this wider distribution than Dumont's last few films, but it remains a challenging arthouse property.

Of course, this isn't the first time Claudel's life has been portrayed onscreen. Bruno Nuytten's lavishly mounted 1989 pic "Camille Claudel" covered her younger days, dwelling principally on her torrid romance with artist and mentor August Rodin; a smash hit in France, it also earned an Oscar nomination for Isabelle Adjani's Claudel. The difference between the two films is as stark as night and day. Nuytten's more melodramatic effort crammed in years of incident in typical biopic fashion, while Dumont's minimalist approach aims to capture an entire life in a three-day timeframe, with his lean script drawn from Claudel's letters and medical records.

The year is 1915, two years after Claudel, then 50, was institutionalized by her younger brother Paul, a celebrated poet in his own right. Having been relocated in 1914 to the remote, church-run Montdevergues Asylum just outside Avignon, to avoid the onset of German troops, the film finds the desperately unhappy captive hungry to escape, eagerly awaiting a rare impending visit from Paul, whereupon she can argue her case for freedom.

As interpreted by Dumont and Binoche, Claudel is plainly not a candidate for asylum living. Though clearly plagued by a persecution complex -- she repeatedly, irrationally asserts that her incarceration is the doing of a vengeful Rodin, with whom she had parted ways more than 20 years previous -- she's a notably lucid presence compared with her fellow patients, most of whom are genuinely disabled. In line with his customary preference for non-pro thespes, Dumont has elected to cast real-life mentally handicapped people in these roles; it's a bold, potentially controversial gambit that effectively underlines the inappropriateness of Claudel's placement.

Watching Binoche interact with these unconventional co-stars is fascinating, and considerably less exploitative than it might sound. There's a sense of touching authenticity to the fluctuating levels of communication among them, as Claudel moves between exasperation and affection for these less-able inmates. There's even an unexpected interlude of gentle comedy, as Claudel sits in on a shambolic rehearsal of "Don Juan" between actors who can scarcely remember one line at a time.

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