

VARIETY

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An uncompromising portrait of thwarted emotions and small town tedium, “The life of Jesus” is a luminous and disconcerting feature debut from scripter-helmer Bruno Dumont. Pic’s deliberate pace, as it details the actions of adolescents with stifled inner lives, poses a commercial obstacle in markets unfriendly to leisurely fare, but film holds definite rewards for patient viewers and fest auds. Pic won France’s prestigious Prix Jean Vigo in mid-April.

Dumont’s movie is another in a small wave of recent Franc films –led by “Will it snow for at Christmas?”, “Marion” and “Fred”-about getting on with life despite financial and cultural limitations. Across the border, Belgian brothers Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne’s outstanding “The promise” mined a livelier side of similar territory.

Making the most of slightly ominous widescreen vistas and intense, practically wordless close-ups, Dumont establishes a tone permeated by a rock-solid sense of place. Helmer manages to delineate the repetitive components of boredom without falling in trap of being boring. There’s an aching, yearning quality mixed with pent-up frustration and anger, much of it communicated via the far-from handsome but utterly compelling face of lead actor David Douche, whose wounded, eerie countenance suggests the young Depardieu crossed with a Roswell alien.

Freddy (Douche), barely 20, lives with his mom, Yvette (Genevieve Cottreel), a doughy, cheerful woman who tends a mostly empty café in the northern French town of Bailleul, where there’s little to say and even less to do. Freddy is inarticulately nuts about his girlfriend, Marie (Majorie Cottreel), a pretty supermarket cashier with whom he has raw, expedient sex as often as possible, including (with Mom’s blessing) in his bedroom over the café.

Freddy and his four male pals zip through town and the spark open countryside on their souped-up motor scooters. This isn’t all that wise in Freddy’s case, as he suffers from unpredictable fits of epilepsy, for which he is begrudgingly treated at a regional hospital. The guys have no ambition and no prospects, and there doesn’t appear to be a role model of any description for several hundred miles in any direction.

The only organized recreation the town seems to offer is a youth marching band –an ensemble so whole-some and peculiar that David Lynch would jump for joy- and the even more surreal Sunday activity of solemnly pitting one’s trained finch against the neighbors’birdies to see which one can chirp most frequently.

Even this cultural backwater has a potential source of strife in the form of an Arab family whose teenage son, Kader (Kader Chaatouf), has eyes for Marie. All it takes is for Marie to be seen talking to Kader –even if what she’s saying is “Scram!”- to make Freddy and his buddies see red.

Tales of barely contained, inchoate angst usually favor a grittier look than this, but lensing is precise and unlabored, with a straightforward elegance. Ambient sound is intelligently dosed, with virtual silence alternating with the drone of motorbikes. The entirely non-pro cast, drawn from local residents on location, is touching and convincing throughout.

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