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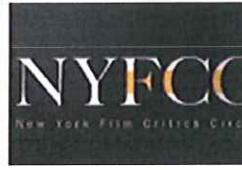
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BY ERIC KOHN

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Review: Juliette Binoche Delivers Commanding Performance In Bruno Dumont's Powerful Crisis of Faith Drama 'Camille Claudel 1915'



"Camille Claudel 1915."

As its name implies, Bruno Dumont's "Camille Claudel 1915" captures a moment in time for the woman in question with tremendous precision. In a incredibly contained performance that ranks among the best of her career, Juliette

Binoche portrays the titular character as she's trapped by mental and physical constraints alike -- not mention one helluva spiritual crisis. As Claudel, portrayed on the big screen once before in the Oscar-nominated 1988 Isabelle Adjani vehicle, Binoche personifies tragedy: A sculptress born in the middle of the 19th century in France, once the mistress and disciple of Auguste Rodin and eventually confined by her family to a remote asylum in the south of France, Claudel inhabits a frozen life.

The movie takes place two years into a stay at the asylum that lasted nearly three decades, but with its pregnant pauses and brooding exchanges, it feels much longer. Exclusively constructed out of scant letters exchanged by Claudel and her brother Paul, "Camille Claudel 1915" boils down the drama to its essence. Binoche's dialogue apparently filled no more than four pages; not one of them is wasted.

In one key scene, she confesses her sense of abandonment to a hapless doctor (Robert Leroy) and unleashes her fury when Paul (a subdued Jean-Luc Vincent) finally pays her a visit, but much of the story merely observes the slow passage of time that defines her despondent environment -- and may have the power to destroy her. "I'm no longer a human being," she tells her doctor in the throes of a lengthy session in which he barely speaks, perhaps because she's beyond consolation.

Dumont pairs his concise approach to storytelling with an exactitude worthy of Robert Bresson. Dumont also uses amateur actors, but to more explosive ends -- "Camille Claudel 1915" was shot at a real asylum and the cast includes inmates along with their caretakers in virtually all the supporting roles. Dumont's emphasis on the inmates' tender faces, riddled with confusion and grief, deepen the humanity coursing through the director's approach. Rather than conceiving of a 19th century "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," his setting is a credible world marked by dreary routines and undulating moods. Claudel is usually downbeat, but even she cracks a smile when several inmates attempt to rehearse a play. The humor arrives as naturally as the grim aura surrounding it.

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Claudel only encounters a semblance of hope when she learns that Paul plans to visit her soon. It's not clear exactly why she's been confined or if Paul hopes to release her, but the very idea of contact with a relative from beyond her purgatorial surroundings creates a necessary element of anticipation -- and a potential validation of her lingering faith. Having established the idea of Paul in Claudel's eyes, Dumont briefly shifts to a nearby villa where the brother plans his trip. Conflicted about the support he continues to provide for the sibling he seems to regard as a lost cause, Paul waxes poetic on his disdain for naive spirituality and discusses the bleaker forces that keep his beliefs intact. In both this sequence and the asylum exchanges, Dumont largely cedes control to his actors, deriving terrific power from their monologues while emphasizing their weary existentialist conceits through the stillness that surrounds them.

When Paul's visit finally takes place, the confrontation brings each effective ingredient together into a satisfactory whole. Though Dumont's minimalist setting sometimes has the feel of a stage play, with the arrival of certain telling close-ups in key moments, the characters' subtle emotions become objects of extraordinary scrutiny. The camera gets so close to their faces one can practically feel their frantic breaths.

As a storyteller, Dumont tends to take his time, but with "Camille Claudel" he excels at it by capturing a succinct period that nevertheless feels like an eternity -- sometimes to a near-suffocating degree that threatens to turn tedious. Yet the

icy quality of the narrative eventually gives it a lasting impact. Dumont seems to assert that the nightmare will continue, explaining the fate of his star in a superimposed title card, while Binoche's furtive glances continue to dominate the screen. History rarely feels so discomfitingly personal at the movies.

Dumont's oeuvre tends to scrutinize the tenuous boundary between the sacred and the profane, whether through the layered character motives in "Hadewijch" or the surreal abstractions of last year's "Outside Satan," but none are quiet as focused in that rigorous quest as the incisive portrait in his latest work. With no time wasted on subplots, the pure misery of Claudel's situation defines the entire picture. But there's a single adventurous moment where the fourth wall threatens to break -- when the doctor attempts to prescribe her malady. "There's no worse trade than art," he says, reflecting on Claudel's former profession. Dumont's vigorous realization of the movie's themes is the ultimate reprimand to that denouement.

Criticwire grade: A-

HOW WILL IT PLAY? Kino Lorber releases "Camille Claudel 1915" at Film Forum in New York this Wednesday ahead of other cities in the coming weeks. Binoche's performance and the story itself should generate enough interest for respectable, if not outstanding, returns.

A version of this review ran during the 2013 Berlin Film Festival.

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