

Film Reviews

Camille Claudel 1915

(France)

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. Camera (color, widescreen), Guillaume Defontaine; editors, Basile Belkhir, Dumont; production designer, Riton Dupire-Clement; costume designers, Alexandra Charles, Brigitte Massay-Sersour; sound (Dolby Digital), Philippe Lecoeur; visual effects supervisor, Hugues Namur; assistant directors, Cyril Pavaux, Claude Debonnet. **Reviewed at Berlin Film Festival (competing)**, Feb. 12, 2013. Running time: **94 MIN.**

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.

By Guy Lodge

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

Juliette Binoche in
“*Camille Claudel 1915*”



“*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 thespis, 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.

The emotional high points of the film, however, come in Claudel’s heated one-on-ones with her doctor and, finally, her brother, both of which afford Binoche spectacular monologues in which she tearfully pleads sanity. Dumont and d.p. Guillaume Deffontaines frame these in simple, static closeup, allowing the actress’s expressive, unadorned face to do all the heavy lifting, and Binoche responds with the same balance of fury and fragility she brought a

few years ago to Abbas Kiarostami’s “*Certified Copy*,” a similarly expansive but unforgiving showcase for her gifts.

One doesn’t envy any actors having their performances compared with Binoche here, and it’s true that the film flags a bit in its second half, as the focus shifts slightly to Paul, played by the less expressive, relatively untested Jean-Luc Vincent. Nonetheless, it’s this mostly unsympathetic characterization that bears the weight of Dumont’s typically rigorous examination of Christian morality and responsibility, as Paul, convinced that his sister’s is “a case of genuine possession,” embarks on a kind of quest for religious self-justification that also rather hazily invokes the poetry of Rimbaud.

All but the most devoted Dumont acolytes may find their attention drifting in the scenes where Paul takes centerstage, but the siblings’ climactic confrontation is genuinely riveting, enhanced by production designer Riton Dupire-Clement’s spartan period furnishings that practically place the actors on a stage. Binoche is particularly heartbreaking to watch as her demeanor switches from girlish excitement at the reunion — the wildflowers woven into her hair are a poignant detail — to panic and finally despair as the realization sinks in that Paul is never going to acquiesce to her demands, even with the doctors on her side.

The film’s spare visuals, combined with the absence of music save one appearance of Bach’s “*Magnificat*,” seem appropriate to a portrait of an artist denied her art.

At the film’s close, plainly worded title cards provide a Dumontian finish to a film that nonetheless boasts more of a beating heart than much of the director’s work.