

VARIETY

LITTLE DARLING

(PETITE CHERIE)

(FRANCE)

A Tadrart Films release of a 3B Prods./Arte France Cinema/Ognon Pictures production, with participation of Canal Plus, GAN Cinema Foundation. (International sales: Celluloid Dreams, Paris.) Produced by Jean Brehat, Rachid Bouchareb.

Directed by Anne Villaceque. Screenplay, Villaceque, Elisabeth Barriere-Marquet. Camera (color, widescreen), Pierre Milon; editor, Anne Riegel; art director, Laurent Deroo; costume designer, Bruno Falatot; sound (Dolby), Jean-Claude Brisson, Thomas Gauder; casting, Maya Serrula. Reviewed at Forum des Images, Paris, May 2, 2000. (In Cannes Film Festival — Directors Fortnight.) Running time: 108 MIN.

With: Corinne Debonniere, Jonathan Zaccai, Laurence Fevrier, Patrick Prejean.

By LISA NESSELSON

Though carefully made, thoughtfully lensed and impressively thesped, Anne Villaceque's first

fiction feature, "Little Darling," is a grating, minimalist exercise that will test the patience of even the most indulgent fans of Gallic fare. Pic concerns a 31-year-old who still lives with her parents, works in a bank, reads cheap romance novels and happens to be a virgin. The details of her stifling life are examined in sometimes elaborate, sometimes halting detail, with (much as in Bruno Dumont's "Humanity," from the same producers) a drastic development filling the final frames. It is impossible to imagine a paying customer willingly enduring the result, so negligible, arbitrary and irritating is what passes for "story."

Sybille (Corinne Debonniere, in a determined, completely convincing perf) is no great beauty. The hairdo with bangs that did wonders for pin-up Betty Page does nothing for her, and she's so modest she still takes off her bra under her nightgown. An only child, she lives with her peppy, well-meaning mother (Laurence Fevrier) and loving but taciturn father (Patrick Prejean) in

a tract house in a sterile 'burb.

When Sybille meets good-looking young Victor (Jonathan Zaccai), her romance novels seem to have come to life. Learning she's a virgin, he gallantly suggests they don't rush things. Victor always carries a briefcase and spends every waking moment garbed in a blue suit with a blue shirt and tie. Sybille is thrilled; Mom and Dad are thrilled.

But the audience has seen Victor withdraw a paltry 20 francs (\$3) from a bank counter, wander a shopping mall, loiter in a train station and shave in a public restroom. He must have some devious plan up his eternally blue sleeve, right? Not exactly.

After Sybille and Victor are wed, the couple live under her parents' roof and half-heartedly explore sex on the outrageously expensive double bed they've compelled the folks to buy. Victor pretends to go to work each morning but relies on his wife for spending money. He wears the same blue suit and shirt for months on end, but no one comments on the fact. The

two couples go on one last vacation together before Sybille and Victor plan to move out. Then, with five minutes of the movie left to go, helmer develops a sudden interest in action.

The intended tone of most of the proceedings is anybody's guess. Sybille's therapist (who seems to have wandered in from some other movie) speaks in a kind of doggerel ("Take care that love's flame not be snuffed"); Victor ties the knot for no discernible reason; Dad usually looks like he just swallowed a goldfish. When the characters aren't outright cranky, they're usually uncomfortable or put-upon.

Debonniere is the best clueless virgin this side of Heather Matarazzo in "Welcome to the Dollhouse." Sometimes boyish, sometimes surly, Zaccai's Victor is a volatile emotional cipher. Fevrier is terrific as the doting mom, and Prejean excels in a quieter register. If only the story were as gratifying as the meticulous widescreen framing, the cast's fine perfs might have amounted to something.