



Friday March 1st, 2019

Jeune Femme (15)

dir: Léonor Serraille

Starring: Laetitia Dosch, Grégoire Monsaingeon

sponsors: Helen Hancocks

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Synopsis: Paris, the present. Paula finds herself in hospital, after breaking up with her boyfriend. In spite of having nowhere to live, she discharges herself, and sets out to find work and a home. She is employed as a nanny and in a lingerie store. She is not well suited to either role, but makes friends with Ousmane, a security guard. She meets her mother but the two do not get along. She upsets the mother of the child she nannies, by disobeying instructions. She discovers she is pregnant. She tries to talk about it with her mother; her ex, Joachim, reappears and tries a rapprochement, unsuccessfully. She sleeps with Ousmane. When Joachim learns that she intends to have an abortion, he is furious and assaults her. In hospital again, possibly after a termination, she makes ready to leave.

The pitfalls and occasional pleasures of rootlessness and self-absorption are anatomised in this portrait of a woman struggling to find her place after a significant break up. Paula (Laetitia Dosch) spent her 20s with Joachim (Grégoire Monsaingeon) an older, famed photographer who was once her professor, and whose sexy pictures of her contributed to his success. Now 31, replaced in his affections by a younger model, and largely estranged from her family for unspecified reasons, Paula is alone and directionless. Her reaction to the break-up briefly lands her in psychiatric care, but she discharges herself to wander Paris alone, haunting her ex's apartment, seeking couches to crash on and freaking out strangers with her socially inappropriate intensity. Joachim's cat, which Paula saves and then spends the rest of the film neglecting and trying to palm off on other people, becomes an emblem of both her natural warmth and her utter dearth of practical skills or responsibility.

Whether we regard this *jeune femme* as a vulnerable, deluded individual in need of further medical intervention or as an enviably free spirit confronting the world's hypocrisies rather depends on which side of her is tilted towards us in any given scene; and whether we read her specific experiences as symptomatic of the general condition of adult femaleness may hinge on how much we deem young women able to take ownership of their own lives. Dosch's performance, which hits a high pitch of flamboyance in the opening hospital scenes and continues to climb thereafter, is another factor that may divide audience sympathies.

The thirty-something female at war with the expectation that she should be able to function day today is an archetype that gained popularity in the 1990s, when characters such as TVs Ally McBeal and the protagonist of Helen Fielding's novel *Bridget Jones's Diary*, clearly are the struggles behind seeming permanently perky, put together and professional while feeling a mess inside. Lately, the likes of *Girls* (2012-17), *Frances Ha* (2012) and *Ingrid Goes West* (2017) have renewed both the trope itself and the argument over



whether its emphasis on female messiness is feminist or quite the reverse. Is the woman whose adult capabilities are a thin veneer over hysteria a rebellious threat to patriarchal expectations, or a perfect product thereof? This is the line along which *Jeune Femme* wobbles in terms of its presentation of Paula's neediness. She has moments of cheering fierceness - when a creepy would-be suitor pronounces himself "touched" by her unhappy state, she shoots back, "Touch yourself!" and leaves - but for the most part, this 31 year old is sorely lacking in adult life skills.

Are we to suppose that these skills were actively denied her by her older ex? In this regard, the film is highly pertinent to the conversation about sexual abuse and female disempowerment that have become so widespread and impassioned in the past six months. Do women bear full responsibility for themselves, or are they at a perpetual social disadvantage that makes autonomy impossible? Do intimate heterosexual relationships, even those that are non-violent and ostensibly loving and supportive, inevitably replicate this power imbalance? "You could have taught me things," Paula tells Joachim, "instead of just taking my photo.." Either way, seemingly, who she turned out to be would have been down to him.

It's striking that the film characterizes male sexual desire itself as somewhat suspect. Joachim's lust for Paula has done nothing but hobble and infantilize her, and ultimately shows itself as violent and destructive. Other men who want her are presented as annoyances and her one dependable friend, Ousmane (Souleymane Seye Ndiaye), seems to solidify as a credible romantic prospect only when he falls asleep instead of insisting on sex. Sexual attractiveness, meanwhile, is a weird system of faintly ridiculous codes and equipment, symbolised by the elaborate items of underwear - glorying in names such as "The Torpedo" - that Paula finds herself selling when she gets a job at a fancy boutique.

Paula's unsuitability for the world of high-end lingerie sales is for the most part played for straightforwardly sitcommy laughs. Her interview for the position sees her present herself as level-headed, calm and obsessively clean and tidy - the exact reverse of what we know her to be - and she almost blows her cover with every hectic stare and needy laugh. The fact that she gets the job is it once testament to her tenacity and potential and to the store's deluded naivety, for in a film like this we are in the odd position of at once rooting for the protagonist and knowing she's a nightmare. But Paula's successful entrée into the fashion world might also be read as a comment on how instability can be packaged as sexy eccentricity, provided it is presented with a certain visual flair. Just

as the highest of high-end couture has a tendency to resemble the haphazard get ups of society's least privileged, so Paula, with bird's-nest hair, daubed make-up and weird outfit, looks good enough to fool the experts. Elsewhere in the film we see her disguise a self-inflicted head wound by sweeping her hair into a 1960s beehive. "Amy Winehouse!" she declares, invoking a woman whose extremes and accessories were a source of edgy intrigue right up until they killed her.

But if the film implicitly wags a disapproving finger at the fetishisation of the needy woman, it's not above putting its own romantic spin on Paula's wayward ways. Told that Lila, a child she's undertaken to nanny, is a handful, Paula enthusiastically replies that she was too, and that "it works out in the end". We know that it isn't working out for Paula at all, and the pall of ambiguity that follows her claim is one of the film's most effectively ambiguous and uncomfortable moments. But when Paula then runs wild with Lila, disregarding instructions and failing to get the child home on time, the film unambiguously portrays the mother as an unimaginative buzzkill for protesting. Lila, meanwhile, clings lovingly to her new best friend, placing innocence and good implicitly on Paula's side. It's the same vibe when Paula discovers that she's pregnant, and a doctor gently inquires about the stability of her life. "Stable? What does stable mean?" Paula cries, bouncing around the room. "Stability's boring!" The doctor responds with beatific, envious admiration. Finally, someone kicking against the tedious practice of checking out on a patient's preparedness for parenthood! The matter of whether or not Paula has terminated her pregnancy, meanwhile, will be delicately fudged.

The film seems disingenuous at these points, and too keen to romanticize Paula's haywire behaviour. Its eye for the value of unexpected moments of connection between people is acute, however. We see Paula at her most unsettled not when she is treated cruelly or dismissively, but when someone shows her unexpected generosity, as when a young female vet (Agathe Desch) agreed to defer a treatment bill for that darned cat. And if the film seems indecisive about how about how funny it wants to be, the observational humour of Léonor Serraille's script can be dead-on. Every overachieving contemporary to whom one has ever failed to measure up is evoked by the early CV offered by Lila's mother, as she shows Paula around her palatial home: "I used to be an accountant; now I'm a dancer," and Paula executes a highly relatable double take when, on impulsively ducking into a cinema, she finds herself ticketed up for something called *immortal Kingdom*:

Renaissance 3.

Credits

Paula Simonian	Laetitia Dosch
Joachim Deloche	Grégoire Monsaingeon
Ousmane	Soulemane Seye Ndiaye
Yuki	Léonie Simaga
Lila's mother	Erika Sainte
Lila	Lilas-Rose Gilberti-Poisot
Doctor	Audrey Bonnet
Paula's mother	Nathalie Richard
Vet	Agathe Desch
Director	Léonor Serraille
Screenplay	Léonor Serraille
Director of Photography	Emile Noblet
Editing	Clémence Carré
Original music	Julie Roué
Sound	Anne Dupouy
Costume	Hyat Luszpinski

France 2017. 987 mins

Another View

We first meet Paula with a giant bandage on her forehead, covering the wound where she headbutted her ex-boyfriend's door. She has just been turfed out of his Parisian flat, where he works as a well-known photographer and she, presumably, pads around like a spoiled housepet. Léonor Serraille's debut feature film gently probes female identity and the smothering influence of the 'genius' man, and it does so with all but the slightest imposition from the man himself. Paula, instead, is the sole focus of *Jeune Femme*.

Laetitia Dosch stars as the lost thirtysomething who has to regain her sense of self after serving as an artist's muse for a decade, and her performance is magnetic. Words tumble from her mouth at speed, her red hair flies in her face, and she's a constant whirling dervish of energetic feeling, but the truth is Paula doesn't have a very deep sense of self. Post-breakup, she is broke, homeless, and directionless after being unceremoniously replaced by a younger girl. She rubs people the wrong way, she's unqualified for most jobs, and even her mother is estranged from her.

As the film progresses, Serraille follows Paula as she searches for work and attempts to figure out her place in the world on her own terms. Along the way, she steals her ex's fluffy white cat, befriends a girl through a bizarre misunderstanding, becomes a loving but irresponsible au pair, and attempts to patch up her relationship with her mother.

With the manic energy of its lead performance left to speak for itself, Serraille's style is one of confident realism. There are run-down hotels, lonely public parks, unfriendly rain-soaked streets: Paris here is an ugly, overwhelming metropolis, with no residue of its old romantic reputation but for in the praise given it by Ousmane, a security guard who befriends Paula. He's an immigrant, and from his outsider's eye, he sees the city's appeal. To Paula, who once was graced with its artistic and financial limelight, it's less attractive. Leonor Serraille directed *Jeune Femme* while pregnant, and when similar topics arise in *Jeune Femme*, Paula's strangely intimate conversation with a female doctor feels strikingly genuine.

Yet *Jeune Femme* is also drolly funny, as when Paula joins a tyrannically feminine retail team in a shopping mall lingerie bar. Slightly unhinged though she may be, there's a warmth and determination in Paula that's impossible not to like. She's a grown woman in a state of arrested development, but she loves fiercely and learns independence in a piecemeal, occasionally painful way. Serraille's film is one of the most satisfying and gently feminist character studies of recent times, using as its guiding force the sheer force of personality of its leading actress.

Christina Newland: Little White Lies

Our next screening: Friday March 8th Mad To Be Normal (UK 2017. Cert 15)

David Tennant leads an all-star cast (including Elizabeth Moss, Michael Gambon and Gabriel Byrne) in this biopic of 1960s psychiatrist R. D. Laing. Concentrating on the time spent in his Kingsley Hall community where he pioneered alternative treatments to the traditional psychiatric practices of the day, the film explores Laing's approach to treating mental illness and the controversies surrounding the community and his relationships with his patients. Tennant's performance steals the show in this fascinating, little seen and widely underrated drama