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The Crime is Mine (15)

Dir: François Ozon

**With: Nadia Tereszkiewicz, Rebecca Marder,
Isabelle Huppert, Fabrice Luchini**

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Synopsis: Paris, 1930s. Struggling actress Madeline shares a flat with fellow struggler and best friend Pauline. After storming out of an audition because the producer tried to assault her, Madeline is shocked to find herself accused of murder after he is found dead. Luckily, Pauline happens to be a lawyer. Together, the two of them concoct a plan: Madeline will stand trial pleading self-defence, Rebecca will get her off and the resulting publicity will make their fortunes. The plan works and both find their careers start to take off. But then the real murderer turns up....

François Ozon's 22nd feature film, *The Crime is Mine*, mines the seam of *8 Women* (2002) and *Potiche* (2010) in taking as its source a lightweight, comic *boulevard* play. All the elements are there: the mocking of the bourgeois manners, witty dialogue, glamorous costumes and decor, a roster of stars parodying stock characters. Everyone has a jolly time, including spectators.

The film is based on a 1934 play, *Mon Crime*, by Georges Berr and Louis Verneuil, one of the star playwriting duos of the time. The story introduces us to two young and beautiful women, blond actress Madeleine (Nadia Tereszkiewicz) and dark-haired lawyer Pauline (Rebecca Marder), struggling to pay the rent of the tiny flat they share. A powerful producer, Montferrand (Jean-Christopher Bouvet), invites Madeleine to discuss a role but she flees when he tries to sexually assault her. Shortly afterwards, he is found murdered. At Pauline's instigation, the innocent Madeleine pleads guilty, and the two women turned the trial into a platform to denounce the oppression and abuse of women, ending in a rousing feminist speech, to the delight of the courtroom audience and the media. Madeleine is acquitted and immediately becomes a major film and stage star, while Pauline's career as a lawyer takes off and the two women move to a luxurious house in Neuilly. As in *Potiche* Ozon mischievously updates the old fashioned and often reactionary formats of the play by hybridizing it with more contemporary concerns: women's right to work, the #MeToo movement. There is even a hint of queer attraction on the part of Pauline for Madeleine, though the latter seems oblivious to it.

Does this make *The Crime is Mine* a feminist film? Only in the limited (though not negligible) sense of foregrounding female characters and offering lead roles to the excellent Tereszkiewicz and Marder, both making waves in French cinema – the former in Valeria Bruni Tedeschi's *Forever Young* (2022) and Stéphanie Di Giusto's *Rosalie* (2023), the latter in Sylvain Desclous's *Grand Expectations* (2022). The two relative newcomers are surrounded by a glittering cast of character actors and stars, primarily Isabelle Huppert, giving a brilliantly funny (if regrettably short) turn as former silent cinema star Odette Chaumette. Noticeably, while the women shine and



triumph, the male characters are either pompously ridiculous, like Judge Rabusset (Fabrice Luchini), prosecutor Vaai (Michel Fau) and industrialist Palmarède (Dany Boon), or, like Madeleine's boyfriend Andre Bonnard (Édouard Sulpice) and his father (André Dussollier), feeble and easily manipulated. And herein lies the trouble.

Madeleine and Pauline are indeed manipulative, happy to lie to gain fame and fortune. Their mendacity exploits and travesties feminist struggles. Not only does the film's narrative echo the traditional misogynist fantasy that women will use their sex-derived power to deceive gullible men, but also, more seriously, it implies that victims' claims of sexual abuse are often invented. Meanwhile, Huppert's character combines a penchant for blackmail with aging anxieties.

Ozon adroitly couches such anti-feminist positions in sophisticated settings, playfully mixing theatre and film. The opening credits roll over a plush crimson and gold theatre curtain, to the murmurs of an audience eagerly anticipating the show. The curtain rises to reveal a swimming pool (evoking Ozon's 2003 *Swimming Pool*) and then a large villa, accompanied by ominous music. We hear shouting in the distance and the young woman, Madeleine, rushes out of the villa full stop. A very attentive spectator will notice that the woman she bumps into on the street is Huppert, who will reappear only much later. At the end of the film, the same two women star in a play recreating the crime we did not see at the beginning. Black and white clips of the films starring Madeleine as well as newsreels of famous female criminals of the time (the Papin sisters, Violette Nozière) punctuate the otherwise richly coloured action, as do references to the popular film culture of the 1930s – the magazine *Cinémonde*, Madeleine and Pauline going to see Danielle Darrieux in *Mauvaise Graine* (Billy Wilder, 1934). This is not coincidentally a light-hearted thriller in which Darrieux plays a delightful young delinquent. With this dazzling medley of images and sounds, Ozon plays hide and seek with the spectator and pays homage to the ambiguity of the boulevard play, a genre that likewise marries brilliant entertainment with dubious ideology.

Credits

Madeleine Verdier	Nadia Terezskiewicz
Pauline Mauléon	Rebecca Marder
Odette Chaumette	Isabelle Huppert
Juge Rabusset	Fabrice Luchini
Fernand Palmarède	Dany Boon
Monsieur Bonnard	André Dussollier
Andre Bonnard	Édouard Sulpice
Monsieur Brun	Régis Laspalès
Leon Trapu	Olivier Broche
Gilbert Raton	Felix Lefebvre
Pistole	Franck de la Personne
Simone Bernard	Evelyne Buyle
Maurice Vrai	Michel Fau
Monsieur Parvot	Daniel Prévost
Mme Jus	Miriam Boyer
Montferrand	Jean-Christophe Bouvet
Celeste	Suzanne de Baecque
Director	François Ozon
Screenplay	François Ozon, Phillipe Piazza
Music	Philippe Rombi
Cinematography	Manuel Dacosse
Editor	Laure Gardette
Art Director	Stephanie Laurent
Costume	Constance Allain, Pascaline Chavanne
France/Belgium 2022. 102m	

Another View

In a high-profile legal case, the accused stands before two courts: the judgement of a jury and the court of public opinion. Though the first may rule unanimously, the second is a more complicated affair where permissible innocence can be branded guilty. Today, court cases have become a source of entertainment like a reality show that creates overnight celebrityhood. At this intersection of criminality and fame, François Ozon's *The Crime is Mine* plays out as the prolific French director's first foray into crime comedy. Set in a romanticised 1930s Paris, the film revolves around whether struggling actress Madeline Rosalie (newcomer Nadia Terezskiewicz) held the revolver that killed a lecherous producer (Jean-Christophe Bouvet). According to Madeleine, the producer sexually assaulted her before she escaped his mansion. But the police, who fumbled together evidence, deemed Madeleine the prime suspect. Luckily, Pauline (Rebecca Marder), Madeleine's best friend and fellow broke roommate, happens to be a lawyer. Together, the dramatic blonde and pragmatic brunette face the judicial system head-on in an engaging battle of wits. With Pauline as her defence counsel and de facto publicity manager, Madeline gives the performance of a lifetime in the dock with rehearsed monologue lines and carefully selected costumes. Her self-defence declaration has her ascending to stardom, opening a new world of fame and notoriety. Simultaneously, Ozon has a whale of a time poking holes in the corrupt justice system. He indulges in opulent sets and smart staging as the film brandishes its biting feminist edge. Also, with nods to Billy Wilder (a *Mauvaise Graine* cinema trip) and the playful inclusion of genre tropes (iris transitions and twiddling moustaches prompt a giggle), Ozon sprinkles *The Crime is Mine* with Parisian cinematic history. The city of lights twinkles as never before as the blossoming film star and the sought-after lawyer still choose to live together and even share a bathtub. The carefully penned intimacy between Madeline and Pauline adds a freshness to the thirties context and

amplifies the latter's desire to keep her friend from the slammer. Yet halfway through, the energy of the jaunty screwball romp begins to flag. Then, the eccentric silent cinema star Odette Chaumette (Isabelle Huppert) enters. She arrives with a flurry of colour and chaos, draped in fur and feathers like a French Cruella De Vil (a Dalmatian even growls at her) claiming to know the truth about the crime. Her extravagant presence brings an absurdity that abruptly ends any meandering. Terezskiewicz and Marder delight as a double act, but it's Huppert who steals the show with a cunning smile.

Emily Maskell: Little White Lies

Our next film: Friday April 11th, 7.30pm
Dahomey (France/Senegal/Benin/Singapore 2024. PG)
Following a deal agreed between the two governments, French authorities begin the shipping back to Benin of artefacts looted by the French during their colonial occupation of the country (then known as Dahomey). Mati Diop's riveting film follows the preparations required to ensure the safe transporting and arrival of the objects, imagines the feelings of the objects at returning to their homeland after such a long time and assesses the reaction of the population of Benin at the arrival in their country of a heritage they know little or nothing about.

Next week's film will be followed by the Society's Annual General Meeting which will be held in the theatre.

Summer season
The summer season will be held at the Terry O'Toole theatre, North Hykeham. Four films will be shown:
May 9 - Double Indemnity (1944): classic film noir directed by Billy Wilder and starring Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray
May 23rd - La Cérémonie (1995): directed by French master of suspense Claude Chabrol and starring Isabelle Huppert, Sandrine Bonnaire and Jacqueline Bisset. Rated the 16th best crime film of all time. TBC
June 13: Taste of Fear (1961): a 1961 British thriller directed by Seth Holt. which stars Susan Strasberg, Ronald Lewis, Ann Todd, and Christopher Lee in a supporting role.
June 27: Charade (1964): called "the best Hitchcock movie Hitchcock never made", this American romantic screwball comedy mystery produced and directed by Stanley Donen stars Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn.
Screenings start at 7.30pm. Entry to all four films is £15.