

THE TASTE OF OTHERS

NEW YORK FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW

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Triple-threat French filmmaker Agnes Jaoui wrote, directed and stars in the sublime dramatic comedy "The Taste of Others," alongside her husband, co-writer and co-star, Jean-Pierre Bacri, an actor well on his way to becoming a Gallic national treasure for his endearing cantankerousness that recalls the best work of Robert DeNiro and Jack Nicholson. Jaoui and Bacri met and matured on the French stage before they got married and started winning Cesar Awards, making them a Garson Kanin/Ruth Gordon or a Mike Nichols/Elaine May *de nos jours*, replete with a mellifluous knack for characterization and a subdued screwball sensibility that's both didactic and farcical. But it's the duo's flair for depicting the time-tested theme of inexorable fate that makes the hugely satisfying "Taste of Others" (screening Friday and Saturday at the 38th New York Film Festival) unmistakably French yet universal in its implications.

A Racine aficionado who says she watched a lot of Woody Allen movies during the film's genesis, Jaoui imbues her directorial debut with such an acute sense of human nature that her characters would probably resonate anywhere in the world. More nuanced than her Cesar-winning script for 1995's "Un Air de Famille" ("Family Resemblances"), though not quite as stagy, Jaoui sets up a frustrated *pas de deux* between art and commerce as two rivaling social circles collide head-on in a suburban French city that's tellingly sandwiched between two rivers. Melding the lugubrious force of Racine with the mannered comic execution of Moliere, "The Taste of Others" feels slightly theatrical in its hubris-laden message but comes across light as air, like the drollest of French screen comedies.

At the center of this restless universe is boorish Castella (Bacri, the Dan Hedaya of France), a suburban captain of industry so steeped in the culture of deal-making and die-casting that he's become oblivious to any sort of authentic culture -- his stamina for novels diminishes after page four; even *Dynasty* repeats fail to enthrall the laughable brute. Apoplectic at the idea of being dragged by his wife Angelique (Christiane Millet) to a community theater performance of Racine's "Berenice," Castella discovers he's moved to tears when the curtain falls and smitten with lead actress Clara (Anne Alvaro), a melancholic single woman pushing forty who also happens to be his English instructor. Castella pursues her relentlessly, churning out embarrassing poetry, snapping up an abstract painting from one of her compatriots, even commissioning a mural on the facade of his namesake factory -- oblivious to the fact that he's bereft of any taste whatsoever.

Clara's circle of friends begrudgingly tolerates Castella's brusque presence, despite his bourgeois demeanor, scatological jokes and omnipresent chauffeur and bodyguard (Alain Chabat and Gerard Lanvin), both of whom waste no time in moving in on Clara's sidekick Manie (Jaoui), a willfully promiscuous bartender who deals hashish on the side. Suddenly these two circles become muddled with each other's conflicting value systems and it's here that the film settles into its deft comic stride, bringing together the unlikeliest couplings in a rigid atmosphere of performing arts centers, bland industrial zones and dull suburban discotheques. Art and commerce, in the form of Clara and Castella, make for awkward dance partners to say the least, especially in someplace so compartmentalized as a French suburb. You wonder if these folks would cross paths more gracefully in Paris, though anti-Parisianism is another of Jaoui's obvious themes; she's less interested in the drawing room mores popularized by Moliere than she is in the rigid, seemingly fixed destinies of the French provincial set.

Mercifully, "The Taste of Others" isn't a culture clash comedy in the vein of something like "Jet Set," the lowbrow snobs-versus-slobs French sensation that Miramax just purchased for repurposing in the American market -- it's far more humane and endearing and it doesn't need repurposing because its themes are so universal. And although its characters sometimes verge on cartoonish (Castella's wife, for example, gives Carmela Soprano a run for her money in the bad-taste home decorating sweepstakes), they're so lovingly rendered and unconventional in outcome that their commonplace status becomes almost welcoming. Bacri's Castella, with his smug self-satisfaction and cemented sneer, teeters on the precipice of caricature, though anyone who's watched this amazing actor at work knows that his perpetual grouchiness is anything but one-note. His triumph lies in his ability to transform a palpably despicable idiot into someone we all know and love -- he's an endearing schmuck, never an easy character to pull off. His bumbling Castella (much like the redeemable asshole he played in "Un Air de Famille") may be French to a fault in the way that he mumbles insults from the back of his throat without deigning to open his mouth all the way. But he's your dad and your dad's dad -- he's even you on your worst day, which is why his smarminess goes down so easily. (It's probably no coincidence that Bacri's father plays himself in a small cameo -- what a delight to see that he comes from a long line of cuddly grumps).

Jaoui, for her part, plays another unapologetic sexpot who wears her doormat like a badge of pride -- no real stretch from her role in "Un Air de Famille" -- until she meets her match in Castella's brooding bodyguard Moreno, who gets emotionally transformed in his own right. Jaoui bears an unmistakable resemblance to Caroline Kennedy Schlosberg, something American audiences should get a kick out of since her Manie character is the opposite of ladylike. Rounding out the terrific ensemble cast are stage veterans plucked from France's subsidized theater milieu. She's an unabashedly generous writer/director/actress who's unafraid to pay homage to the grass roots milieu that created her.

The first time I saw "The Taste of Others" was last Spring on a Sunday afternoon in a Montparnasse multiplex in Paris and I think I witnessed first-hand why the film (and Jaoui's oeuvre in general) has been so successful in France -- and why it stands a good chance of making a splash in America next February. Aside from its classical aspirations and time-tested themes, the film understands the futility of human connections but it delivers its disheartening message in a way that's both damning and delightful. The audience I shared it with in Paris -- mostly bourgeois families on a post-prandial cinematic outing -- reveled in watching characters so near and dear to themselves that weren't immediately Parisian. There's also a brimming sense of hope revealed at the end of "The Taste of Others," making you wonder if Jaoui is less the product of her beloved Racine than you might think. The film closes on a depressing community theater rendition of Hedda Gabler (only in France!) but guess who remains the most riveted spectator of them all? Fate may be inexorably predestined in "The Taste of Others," but even bulldogs can be tamed.

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