

DVD Review: 'The Beautiful Person' Offers French Take on Teenage Drama

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- [Christophe Honoré](#) [2]
- [DVD Review](#) [3]
- [Grégoire Leprince-Ringuet](#) [4]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [5]
- [IFC Films](#) [6]
- [Inglourious Basterds](#) [7]
- [Lea Seydoux](#) [8]
- [Louis Garrel](#) [9]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [10]
- [The Beautiful Person](#) [11]
- [Theater, TV, DVD & Blu-Ray](#) [12]

CHICAGO – Léa Seydoux is blessed with the sort of face that appears to convey a thousand different emotions without ever having to move a muscle. Her smile is beautiful but it almost feels like an intrusion, breaking the exquisite mystery of her passive, brooding expressions. Much has been written about her resemblance to Godard's muse, Anna Karina, which perhaps inspired New Wave successor Christophe Honoré to direct her in this evocative drama.

"La belle personne" (a.k.a. "The Beautiful Person") could've easily been made in the '60s. Within the walls of its claustrophobic school, hormonal urges and repressed desires materialize in the form of pointed glances and scribbled notes as opposed to Facebook posts. Gossip is spread the old fashioned way, without the assistance of a Twitter feed. Body language emerges as the primary tool of communication. When a tight embrace is mistaken for a kiss, it can lead to devastating consequences.



DVD Rating: **3.5/5.0**

Madame de La Fayette's 1678 novel, "La Princesse de Clèves," functions more or less as the source material for Honoré and Taurand's script, which gives the classic story an enticing modern twist. Whereas "Clèves" centered on a young heiress caught in a love triangle between her royal husband and the Duke of her dreams, "Person" follows a teenage student, Junie (Seydoux), torn between the desires of her devoted boyfriend, Otto (Grégoire Leprince-Ringuet), and an infatuated teacher, Nemours (Honoré regular Louis Garrel). Junie's hypnotic eyes carry the weight of tragedy, as her awe-struck peers whisper about the sudden death of her mother. There's no question that the girl's emotional state is at its most fragile, and Nemours seems all too eager to take advantage of it. Though the story requires its two marquee names to be in love, the film does not build a convincing case. Besides the fact that Nemours is a loathsome cad, there are few moments in which his eyes ever seem to truly connect with Junie's. Garrel's ageless beauty is the only thing his character has going for him, and the actor is effective in scenes where the camera lingers on his love-struck gaze. Yet Seydoux's attention appears to be elsewhere, as she exudes a presence more enigmatic than passionate.



Léa Seydoux stars in Christophe Honoré's *The Beautiful Person*.

Photo credit: IFC Films

Throughout his career, Honoré has always been drawn to exploring the panorama of adolescent lust. While so many films about high school romance settle for trite melodrama, Honoré's unsentimental, often detached approach is rather refreshing. He views his characters not as standard archetypes but unformed beings with wildly erratic heartstrings. Poor Otto (tenderly played Leprince-Ringuet) has no idea where he stands with Junie. She'll bare her breasts to him one day and then treat him like a stranger the next. His despair eventually leads to one of the most unexpected yet oddly naturalistic musical numbers in recent memory. Honoré does a wonderful job of fleshing out other segments of the student body, creating a fully realized world that could've inspired a miniseries, if not a soap opera (it sure beats anything on the CW Network).



Louis Garrel stars in Christophe Honoré's *The Beautiful Person*.

Photo credit: IFC Films

Junie's cousin, Matthias (Esteban Carvajal-Alegria), plays a crucial role in the film's central action, and his subplot gradually develops a life of its own. We also meet the lovers of varying ages that Nemours dumps in order to single-mindedly pursue Junie. "I'm as lost as you are," Nemours moans to her, deluding himself with the belief that his problems are in any way linked to her own. Nemours' love isn't just blind, it's willfully ignorant. While "Clèves" ended on a rather bleak note, "Person" takes a grounded approach to the material that ends up being much more hopeful.

This may be one of the rare French films in which audiences find themselves rooting for the two extraordinarily photogenic leads to not end up in bed together. The picture is ultimately as frustrating and enthralling as lust itself. As usual, Honoré elicits uniformly authentic performances from his young cast, particularly Seydoux, who seems poised to become an international star of considerable magnitude, particularly after her brief yet beguiling appearances in "Inglourious Basterds" and the upcoming Woody Allen comedy, "Midnight in Paris." Seydoux is a splendid example of an actress whose magnetism is not merely a result of her beauty. The conflicting nuances reverberating beneath every stolen kiss and stifled sob is the stuff that stars are made of.

"The Beautiful Person" is presented in its 1.78:1 aspect ratio, complete with flawless picture quality and optional subtitles in English and Spanish. A misleading trailer edits together unrelated shots to create a romantic connection between Seydoux and Garrel that's far more direct than the one in the actual film.

'The Beautiful Person' is released by IFC Films and stars Léa Seydoux, Grégoire Leprince-Ringuet, Louis Garrel, Esteban Carvajal-Alegria, Simon Truxillo and Agatha Bonitzer. It was written by Christophe Honoré and Gilles Taurand and directed by Christophe Honoré. It was released on May 17, 2011. It is not rated.



[13]

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