

Blu-ray Review: Mélusine Mayance Mesmerizes in 'Sarah's Key'

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CHICAGO – Sometimes one performance can bolster the impact of an entire production. That's certainly the case with Gilles Paquet-Brenner's overlooked adaptation of Tatiana de Rosnay's bestseller. Though the picture's marquee name is Kristin Scott Thomas, her character merely provides a modern framework for the real story, set during the massive 1942 deportation of Jewish civilians from France.

Though de Rosnay's tale is a work of fiction, it is entirely grounded within the reality of its time period and locations, such as the indoor track, Vélodrome d'Hiver, where prisoners were stored before being transported to various camps (in this case, Beune-la-Rolande). What makes "Key" particularly disturbing is that fact that it views these horrors through the perspective of its titular child. She's played by ten-year-old Mélusine Mayance, who has already emerged as one of the most extraordinarily gifted actresses of her generation.



Blu-ray Rating: **3.5/5.0**

In my review of François Ozon's whimsical 2009 fantasy, "Ricky," I said that Mayance had "the sort of dark, eerily inquisitive eyes that unspeakable thoughts could easily be projected upon." Yet in the case of "Key," it's the unspeakable nature of her surroundings that cause Mayance's eyes to convey such startling depths of emotion. The remarkable range that Mayance has displayed in these two roles is worthy of a pint-sized Meryl Streep. Though she's only onscreen for roughly half of "Key"'s running time, she makes the film far more powerful than it may have been in the hands of a different actress. Like "The Reader" and "The Debt," this film jumps back and forth between time periods, thus interrupting its escalating nightmare with a less compelling parallel storyline set decades into the future. Thomas plays Julia, an American journalist in Paris who learns that the apartment where she plans to live with her husband, Bertrand (Frédéric Pierrot), has a dark history. Sixty years ago, it was owned by the Starzynski family prior to their deportation. When Julia discovers that Sarah was the only family member who managed to survive the camps, she sets out to find her.



Mélusine Mayance stars in Gilles Paquet-Brenner's drama Sarah's Key.

Photo credit: Anchor Bay Entertainment

Though the disk jacket promises a nail-biting mystery, the film is not particularly suspenseful. As the puzzle pieces start to coalesce, they

don't reveal any contrived twists or last-minute revelations. Instead, they form a shattering portrait of a young life that was ultimately destroyed by the oppression of unthinkable evil. The subplot involving Julia and Bertrand's tense relationship interrupts the film's dramatic flow rather than enhances it. After scorching the screen as a ruthless mobster in Jacques Audiard's riveting crime drama, "A Prophet," Niels Arestrup steals scenes in an entirely different role (which is, in fact, strikingly similar to his upcoming role in Steven Spielberg's "War Horse"). He plays an aging caregiver who risks everything to protect Sarah from suspicious soldiers, and his scenes form the heart of the picture. While the emotional payoff that concludes "Key" is entirely earned, it never upstages that wrenching moments that preceded it. Many films have attempted to stage the brutal separation of mothers from their children in the camps, but few have been as viscerally affecting as the scene where Sarah and her mother (Natasha Mashkevich) share one final embrace as chaos swirls around them.



"Sarah's Key" is presented in flawless 1080p High Definition (with a 2.35:1 aspect ratio) and features a string of self-contained featurettes masquerading as a one-hour making-of documentary. There's a terrific interview with de Rosnay, who received several rejections before putting her novel on the back burner. It wasn't until she wrote a feature on publisher H elo ise d'Ormesson that her novel finally received the necessary attention. After writing several books in French, de Rosnay had written the entire first draft of "Key" in English without realizing it, and the novel ended up becoming her U.S. debut.

Many members of the cast and crew felt a personal connection to the material. Paquet-Brenner's father died in a concentration camp, while Mashkevich grew up in a similarly tumultuous wartime climate. After running lines with Pierrot over a cup of tea, Thomas discusses how she related to Julia's abandonment of her roots. Though too much of the behind-the-scenes footage plays like the video diaries of random crew members, there are some diverting segments focusing on the production of key sequences. The actors appeared visibly emotional between takes of the Beune-la-Rolande sequence, while actual survivors were on hand to share their experiences. Visual effects artists seamlessly recreated the original terraces and glass ceiling of V elodrome d'Hiver to preserve the location's claustrophobic structure.

Arestrup claims that having a well-developed inner life is the key to being an actor, since the vast majority of the day is comprised of endless waiting. One can only imagine what sort of inner life Mayance has to inspire such consistently phenomenal work. Paquet-Brenner refers to her as one of the best actresses he's ever worked with, and the proof is evident throughout the footage. It's awe-inspiring to watch how Mayance can immerse herself within an intensely emotional scene before breaking into a toothy grin as soon as the cameras cut. I can't name another performer her age with a more promising future.

'Sarah's Key' is released by Anchor Bay Entertainment and stars Kristin Scott Thomas, M elusine Mayance, Niels Arestrup, Fr ed eric Pierrot, Natasha Mashkevich and Aidan Quinn. It was written by Serge Joncour and Gilles Paquet-Brenner and directed by Gilles Paquet-Brenner. It was released on Nov. 22, 2011. It is rated R.



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