

Sensual 'Renoir' Fails to Explore Titular Giants' Genius

Submitted by [mattmoviemann](#) [1] on April 26, 2013 - 6:35am

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Rating: **2.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Naming a picture after two of the great artistic minds in human history is quite a high bar to set. Director/co-writer Gilles Bourdos attempts to tell the tale of both impressionist painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir (Michel Bouquet) and his son, the future filmmaker Jean Renoir (Vincent Rottiers), who would go on to helm controversial masterpieces such as 1939's "The Rules of the Game." These are fascinating people, but the script doesn't even begin to do them justice.

Taking place in the twilight of Pierre-Auguste's life circa 1915, Bourdos's lead-footed vignette upstages its two male subjects with the underdeveloped character of Andrée Heuschling (Christa Theret), a woman who would prove to be the favored muse for both artists. It's hard to say how Andrée influenced these men, apart from exuding her youthful radiance, and there are times when the line between muse and prostitute becomes hopelessly blurred. Neither Renoir seems to view her as a human, but rather a tool to manipulate for their own purposes.

When he's not suffering from the ailments of old age, Pierre-Auguste speaks in platitudes suitable for framing, while Jean remains cold and distant, even as he allegedly develops feelings for Andrée. Recovering from WWI-related wounds, Jean is determined to return to battle, a fact that bewilders his new flame and disappoints his father, who repeatedly voices his belief that art is all that matters. Whereas his father favored paintings that were "pleasant and cheerful," Jean would later direct motion pictures aiming to provoke the masses with their scathing critiques of war and the French upper-class. Bourdos leaves a great deal of potential unrealized by allowing the encounters between father and son to be so stagey and wooden, lacking in the sort of insight that would've brought the audience closer to understanding the psyches of these great men. There's an excellent story to be told about the impact Pierre-Auguste had on Jean, but this film is more interested in focusing on Andrée, perhaps because she's just so darn photogenic. There's an abundance of sensually lit nude scenes in which the camera caresses Theret's skin with the same attention to detail as Renoir's gaze. Yet there's a hollowness to these characters that prevents any sexual spark from being ignited.



Christa Theret and Michel Bouquet star in Gilles Bourdos's *Renoir*.

Photo credit: Fidelite Films and Samuel Goldwyn Films

Unlike Jacques Rivette's captivating 1991 masterwork, "La belle noiseuse," which scrutinized the relationship between painter and muse with such intimate clarity that the audience felt like they were in the room with them, "Renoir" constantly holds the viewer at arm's length. Aside from a few close-ups of brushstrokes, we get no sense of Pierre-Auguste's technique or style, though Andrée does complain about her "boss"'s tendency to make her "look fat." Indeed, the elder Renoir's infamous love of voluptuous female flesh is a refreshing rebuke to the modern American idea of feminine glamour, which requires women to be as skinny as possible in every area—with two key exceptions, of course. Thankfully, performers like Lena Dunham are challenging mainstream perceptions of beauty with their boldly uninhibited work. One of the most erotic scenes in recent memory took place in Bertrand Bonello's "House of Pleasures," in which a young Parisian woman (Ilana Zabeth) is ordered to disrobe before her potential employer at a brothel. The lighting illuminates every exposed inch of her body, sparing the viewer of nothing while causing her to truly resemble a Renoir painting come to life. Her natural curves only enhance her loveliness rather than detract from it, and I imagine Pierre-Auguste himself would've agreed wholeheartedly. Bonello's film also had a great deal more to say about the male gaze and the female desire to entertain it. Bourdos's film, by comparison, is shallow and flat.

If great cinematography is what viewers are seeking, then "Renoir" just might be worth the admission price purely on the basis of the typically rapturous work from Ping Bin Lee ("In the Mood for Love"). The gold and green hues of Pierre-Auguste's sun-drenched farm are so vibrantly alive that they cause each human inhabitant to resemble an embalmed still life. As Andrée first approaches the Renoir estate, the wind billowing through the fields and branches suggests an entire world quivering with erotic tension. Pierre-Auguste's refusal to "paint the world black" is certainly reflected in Lee's scintillating compositions, while Jean's darker worldview is accompanied by grim shadows. Though Jean ultimately professes his devotion to Andrée, a final title card infers that she was a disposable muse, cast into poverty while Jean was "covered in honors." Since the script doesn't bother portraying the complexities of their relationship, Jean simply comes off as a cad.



Vincent Rottiers and Christa Theret star in Gilles Bourdos's Renoir.

Photo credit: Fidelite Films and Samuel Goldwyn Films

In a film overloaded with disappointments, the worst is its misuse of young Thomas Doret, who gave one of the greatest child performances I've ever seen in last year's criminally overlooked gem, Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne's "The Kid with a Bike." This is only Doret's second film, and Bourdos apparently was content in allowing the extraordinarily gifted talent to maintain the same brooding scowl on his face in every single one of his scenes. He's playing the role of Claude "Coco" Renoir, the man who would grow to become the renowned cinematographer of "La Grand Vadrouille" and "The Spy Who Loved Me," but Bourdos transforms him into a mere vessel for exposition, interrupted only by his caustic request for Andrée to show him her breasts. Well, at least that explains his involvement in "Barbarella."

'Renoir' stars Christa Theret, Michel Bouquet, Vincent Rottiers and Thomas Doret. It was written by Gilles Bourdos, Michel Spinosa and Jerome Tonnerre and directed by Gilles Bourdos. It opened at Landmark Century Centre Cinema on April 26th, 2013. It is rated R.



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By [MATT FAGERHOLM](#) [13]

Staff Writer

HollywoodChicago.com

matt@hollywoodchicago.com [12]

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