

‘The Witnesses’ Bear the AIDS Burden of a Time Less Remembered

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CHICAGO – While Paris, France in 1984 probably wasn’t as romantic as the Paris in several of its other lionized eras, it existed just the same. As portrayed in “The Witnesses,” it was an age that may have been more uncertain than the others based on a melting pot of inhabitants who immigrated to the City of Lights in search for a new life.



Johan Lib  reau in “The Witnesses”.
Photo credit: Strand Releasing

But it was also an age where the co-mingling of that particular generation produced some unintended consequences. The story of who survived and who didn’t defined our nature for several years to come.

Portrayed by Emmanuelle B  art, Sarah is a writer of children’s books who has just had her first child. She is married to a police officer, Mehdi (Sami Bouajila), and has several loyal friends. One of her best friends is a gay, middle-aged doctor named Adrien (Michel Blanc).

He’s thrilled to introduce her to his new young lover: Manu (Johan Lib  reau). Manu is a player, however, and sets his sights on Mehdi. The two begin a secret affair that evolves into obsessive love. Manu escapes Paris because of the complications that arise.

In the meantime, Adrien can’t get over his feelings for Manu. He pursues him through his job at a holiday camp and discovers that the boy has become strangely ill. It’s a strain of skin cancer that’s rare but shows up with more frequency in the Paris clinics where Adrien works.



Sami Bouajila (left), Emmanuelle Beart (second to left), Johan Lib  reau (second to right) and Michel Blanc in “The Witnesses”.
Photo credit: Strand Releasing

It’s caused by the HIV virus, and in Manu’s case, it has become full-blown AIDS. The characters deal with this mysterious new malady in divergent ways.

Mehdi (Manu’s former lover) sweats through a blood test and becomes estranged from Sarah. Adrien becomes part of a French research team that isolates the viral strain. Manu’s sister – an aspiring opera singer named Julie – is frustratingly isolated from her brother. Manu’s disease becomes a world crisis.

It’s interesting to note these different reactions within “The Witnesses”. The disease was so new and so sudden that those effected by it – in both a physical and emotion sense – hardly knew what hit them. Sarah’s character, for example, finds that she can’t connect to her new child.

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She opens up to her mother to find out why. Adrien’s brittle and angry doctor evolves to stoic heroism in the pursuit of the viral research.

There are some broad lines drawn especially in the martyred AIDS sufferer Manu. Not much is understood about him aside from his predilection for sleeping around and being pursued compulsively by two other men. His character feels incomplete and his anger at the condition misused.

The narrative pace also slackens toward the end of the film. As in real life, often the main crisis morphs into a continuance that has no slam-bang conclusion. Rather, we just see a small hope that awakes to experience another sunrise. As Ernest Hemingway once said, Paris is a moveable feast.

“The Witnesses” opened on May 16, 2008. In Chicago, the film plays at the Music Box Theatre.



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