

Tepidly Paced ‘The Duchess of Langeais’ a Costume Drama Lacking the Dramatic

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CHICAGO – Honoré de Balzac is a famous French writer from the post-Napoleonic age who focused on the societal mores with a sense of realism that hadn’t been seen in literature until that point. He reveled in the oblique moral ambiguity of the human condition.

In that sense, it may be better to pick one of his many books or plays because the film adaptation of his short story “The Duchess of Langeais” can’t match up to the essence of his prose.



Shown in flashback, duchess Antoinette de Langeais (Jeanne Balibar) is a married and bored aristocrat who spends her time frequenting the extravagant balls of 1820s Paris.

At one such event, she meets general Armand de Montriveau (Guillaume Depardieu, who is Gerald Depardieu’s son).

Inflamed by the Antoinette’s many charms, Armand sets his cap on wooing the society maven. Entranced by the general’s attention, Antoinette begins a series of cat-and-mouse games to keep him attentive yet at arm’s length.

Despite his intent and perseverance, Armand can’t seduce the elusive duchess. When he decides to issue his revenge, in a strange plot twist he finally succeeds in gaining the affection he so long desired.



As in all star-crossed affairs, though, it might be too late for the lovers. If you like multi-arc'd episodes of “Masterpiece” (formerly “Masterpiece Theatre”), the pacing might work in this padded and long film.

As it was, experiencing this in real time was akin to watching two snails race on a muddy track. It had a scenic scope that was impressive with bedroom parlors, ballrooms and cathedral catacombs.

The symbolic aspects of the religion, the military and class structure are well represented. Also, the mystery of all these important societal elements carries more weight when measured against a pre-technological, superstitious age.

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But this doesn’t necessarily make for a well-lubricated narrative. Balibar and Depardieu stay true to their ambiguous characters and joust nicely around the conventions of forbidden love.

Though there were long stretches with a temptation to scream “all right, already!” scandalous love takes time to develop. It sometimes takes a village if not a shadowy secret fraternity.

While it was their intervention that gave the film some spice, it didn’t cure the attitude of “who cares?” in observing the back-and-forth attempts to co-mingle.

As well, this tale could have used some serious bodice ripping. Instead of just talking about soldiering, some old-fashioned horseback and swordplay might also have broken up the focus on the urge to merge between the duchess and the general.

In Chicago, “The Duchess of Langeais” opened on June 6, 2008 exclusively at Landmark’s Century Centre Cinema.



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