La Vie en Rose

Talent: Marion Cotillard, Gerard Depardieu, Emmanuelle Seigner, Jean-Pierre Martins, Manon Chevallier, Pascal Greggory

Date of Review: Friday, 13 July 2007

Director/Producer/Editor: Olivier Dahan
Duration: 140 minutes
Classification: M
We rate it: Four and a half stars.

Given that it’s Harry Potter time again (the fifth film in the series has rolled out this week) it’s also that part of the cinematic year during which any number of smaller, quieter, even – dare one say it – potentially more interesting films can come and go almost undetected in the wake of the box-office juggernauts. Not that there’s anything wrong with young Harry; it’s just that enormous franchises like his can so easily obscure worthy smaller films that dare to open at around the same time. La Vie en Rose is precisely such an offering: a carefully made and beautifully performed bio-pic of legendary French songstress Edith Piaf. The film has been a big deal in its native country, and rightly so; here though it’s a minor art-house release, and in my opinion it’s absolutely worthy of discussion.

Piaf of course remains a cherished icon for the French. Rising as she did from a truly awful childhood (which comprised numerous abandonments at the hands of her deeply flawed parents, erstwhile adoptions by brothel-workers, and serious illnesses that would have profound effects on her in later life) Piaf was discovered by a middle-level nightclub owner and given the opportunity to air her extraordinary voice, the voice that would help its owner transcend her difficult circumstances and somehow encapsulate her country’s post-war pain. It remains a truly remarkable, heartbreaking sound, and it’s clear that this film is in many ways an essay on its enduring fascination and uniqueness.

For a film like La Vie en Rose to succeed one needs to begin with very intelligent casting, and director Olivier Dahan has been clever enough to cast a star in the ascendant, Marion Cotillard, to play Piaf. Cotillard (whom English-speaking audiences remember as Russell Crowe’s love interest in the recent A Good Year, and whom art-house cinemagoers remember from A Very Long Engagement and Innocence) is a naturally luminous screen presence, and the kind of actress who is able to project past her own glamour and radiate extremes of emotion. A most assured...
performer who has already appeared in a significant number of films in France, Cotillard has nonetheless been hampered with regard to the kinds of roles she has been offered because of her radiant beauty. At first glance, many people feel Cotillard would more likely be chosen to be the face of Chanel no. 5 than to play unglamourous roles, but as the ravaged-looking Piaf, the actress proves her talent beyond a doubt. For much of the film’s length Cotillard is covered in elaborate makeup and prosthetics, and she truly transforms herself into the great singer from the inside out. The pain, the determination to succeed, the longing for enduring love and passion, and the sadness of bereavement that shaped Piaf’s life are all indelibly conveyed through Cotillard’s breathtaking turn.

Dahan’s film tells its story like many bio-pics of this kind tend to do; chopping backwards and forwards in time in order to develop the important themes in the subject’s life, the film slowly builds a detailed portrait of Piaf’s complex personality, and creates a vivid sense of the passions that drove her. From the opening in beautifully-recreated period Paris, Dahan flits deftly across the globe and into and out of numerous timeframes, punctuating the narrative with the songs that are for many of us still immediately evocative of something indelibly French. There’s mystery in here, too; the essential strangeness of Piaf as a figure is never quite explained, and it seems this is deliberate; from the revelation about her estranged child to the romantic fixations she retained until her death, her emotional complexities were substantial. A fascinating, tragic and unforgettably gifted figure, Piaf has been given a fitting memorial of sorts in this beautifully constructed film.

Nick Prescott

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