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REVIEWS

Aug. 17, 2006

La Vraie Vie Est Ailleurs

By Ray Bennett

LOCARNO, Switzerland -- Strangers on a train are not always as sick and twisted as Hitchcock believed. Sometimes they are the right person in the right place at the right time, as Swiss director Frederic Choffat suggests in his romantic feature "La Vraie Vie Est Ailleurs" (Real Life Is Elsewhere).

Given its world premiere in competition in the Filmmakers of the Present sidebar at the Locarno International Film Festival, the film tracks three separate, unnamed travelers from Geneva as they each meet strangers who will have an effect on their lives.

Bottom line: Enjoyable yarn about three travelers and the strangers they meet on trains.

Shot guerilla style with a minimal crew at different locations with improvised input from the cast, the film has a coherent feel and offers impressive performances and memorable images. It should fare well commercially on the art house circuit.

Choffat captures the pull of railway stations and the rush of departing for faraway places in the early scenes as people hurry for their trains in Geneva.

One of them is a scholarly woman (Sandra Amodio) boarding the train for Marseilles, where she is to deliver an important presentation on her scientific research in the health field.

When the man (Vincent Bonillo) in the seat opposite tells the ticket inspector that he not only has no ticket but he also has no identification and no money, the woman impulsively pays for his fare. In Marseilles, the man has no place to stay, and when there are no rooms available at the woman's hotel, she offers him the couch in her room.

Meanwhile, a young Swiss-born woman (Antonella Vitali) is moving to Naples in order to reaffirm her Italian heritage. Seen

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off by her friends, she finds herself in a sleeper carriage overseen by a zealous but gloomy Italian conductor (Roberto Molo). He admires Switzerland and despises southern Italy, warning the girl about the terrors of Naples and the dangers of traveling alone.

When no other single women board the train and she declines a move to the family carriage, the conductor insists on being her protector through the night.

Third, a young man (Dorian Rossel) headed for Berlin, where his girlfriend has just given birth, misses his connection in Dortmund, Germany, and has to spend the night in the vast, empty station. Empty, that is, apart from a beautiful and intriguingly reckless young Czech woman (Jasna Kohoutova) who is on her way to Bucharest.

The film cuts back and forth among the three couples in the steady hands of Choffat and editor Cecile Dubois. Severine Barde's cinematography makes the most of the atmosphere provided by trains and stations, especially in the nighttime sequences at Dortmund. The sound, by Jurg Lempen and Patrick de Rahm, plays an important role, as does the score by Pierre Audetat and Stade.

The story lines are inventive, and the acting is naturalistic despite the contrived circumstances. It all adds up to a journey well worth taking.

LA VRAIE VIE EST AILLEURS (REAL LIFE IS ELSEWHERE)

Rita Prods.

Credits:

Director: Frederic Choffat

Screenwriters: Frederic Choffat, Julie Gilbert with the participation of the actors

Producers: Nax Karli, Pauline Karli Gygax

Director of photography: Severine Barde

Music: Pierre Audetat, Stade

Editor: Cecile Dubois

Cast:

Woman in Marseille: Sandra Amodio

Man in Marseille: Vincent Bonillo

Woman in Naples: Antonella Vitali

Man in Naples: Roberto Molo

Woman in Dortmund: Jasna Kohoutova

Man in Dortmund: Dorian Rossel

Security guard: Gilles Tschudi

No MPAA rating

Running time -- 84 minutes

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