

MOVIES

'Jean' illustrates a literal story of rural hardship and acceptance

Review by
Sean Axmaker

When the noted French film director Marcel Pagnol wrote "Jean De Florette," he had plans to make it his cinema masterpiece. The film was a commercial failure and the material was reworked to become the two volume novel "L'eau des Collines."

Now Claude Berri tackles the material in a two-film work, the first half of which is "Jean De Florette" (the second half, "Manon of the Spring," was shot at the same time and should follow shortly).

The story is classical in both the best and worst senses. The premise is simple and striking: wealthy landowner Cesar Soubeyran (Yves Montand) wants his neighbor's farm for the flower farm proposed by his nephew Ugolin (Daniel Auteuil). An argument with the owner leads to a fight and Soubeyran leaves him dead.

Soubeyran figures the last living relative will sell cheap, but he did not plan on the likes of Jean Cadoret (Gerard Depardieu), a humpbacked tax collector from the city who wants to raise his family in the splendor of his beautiful country estate.

Soubeyran and Ugolin have a plan, however. A stones throw from the house is the spring with which Ugolin hopes to irrigate his gardens; but the spring is all but grown over and forgotten. The two seal it up, forcing Jean to march a mile to the closest spring around to keep his garden alive, while Ugolin plays the good neighbor, offering advice and sympathy but no practical help. When Jean is broken by the impossibility of his task he will sell cheap and Ugolin will have his operation.

The problem is that Jean will not be broken. Hardship only

makes him work harder, failure only comes back that much stronger. Berri makes Jean everything that is good and innocent: he plays harmonica, has a beautiful, loving family, is friendly and open with all he meets and literally oozes nobility in his stand to make his garden paradise work.

Jean's weaknesses are his trusting nature, his idealism and his flawed understanding of farming, all of it learned from how to books. And God forbid Ugolin, or anybody in the village for that matter, would

plotting their destruction.

Therein lies the worst sense of "Jean De Florette's" classical nature: the literalness of ideas. Berri makes his film grand, accessible and beautiful, but he works so hard that the epic ideas swallow up the simple power of a story simply told.

Every telling action becomes a symbol with a capital S. The pendulum of a clock is stopped after a death, for example, complete with a close-up of the hand in case we missed it.

Even Jean's suffering is turned into literal martyrdom, all while Manon stares on impassively, seeing and understanding all as she sees Ugolin lie and her father destroy himself. Manon herself becomes a symbol of innocence incarnate, losing her identity as human in the process.

Berri and screenwriting partner Gerard Brach work too hard in their adaption, and Depardieu and Montand bring in performances that capture almost too well the simple contrasts of their characters. For the most part we are presented gesture without nuance and broad thematic overkill without subtext.

Yet "Jean De Florette" is still beautiful and satisfying. Depardieu, Montand and Auteuil register far more subtle power in their faces than in their more studied actions, and the film is studded with brief, poetic moments of pain and joy. Berri's conviction is felt through the overwrought drama and the actors find moments of heartfelt truth communicated beautifully.

Berri has made his epic accessible and understandable to all with his broad thematic strokes and careful visual detail. His Jean is a pitiable creature, his Soubeyran a hateful schemer, his Ugolin a pathetic little man. I only wish they were more human and less archetypal.

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offer him some real, sound advice.

In contrast to Jean are the greedy Soubeyran and his simple nephew. They feel no guilt over their actions, no compassion for Jean and his family, nothing for anyone but themselves and their plan to alienate the city folks from the town. The townspeople are silent accomplices to the plans. They know of the spring and suspect Soubeyran's hand, but will not interfere. Live and let live, or in this instance, live and let die.

Berri's theme is simple: people do the most evil things to their fellow humans in their greed for power and money and in their compliant ignorance. Jean the hunchback is outcast for his deformity, his city past and the supposed stuck-up pride that Soubeyran accuses him of in the safety of the bars.

Yet Jean, who understands how ignorance leads to hate, accepts and defends his friendship with Ugolin, over the protests of his wife Aimee and silent daughter Manon, who have an intuitive dislike to the ugly young man who is secretly

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