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CINEMA21

French epic spellbinding

At \$17 million France's costliest film ever, Jean de Florette plays out life-and-death struggle in beautifully filmed, emotionally exhausting blockbuster.

BY ELEANOR MALIN

Jean de Florette

This classic film adaptation of Marcel Pagnol's two-volume novel, *L'eau des Collines*, (*The Water of the Hills*), deserves the accolades it has been receiving, and the ample use of adjectives such as "sweeping," "grand," and "epic." The simple, but gripping story pits the forces of good against evil, but nothing about the film is simple. Yves Montand as Cesar Soubeyran, richest farmer in his part of

.Cinema

rural Provence, is a bachelor with his only heir a nephew, the simpleton, Ugolin. Ugolin wants to grow flowers; the best land for that falls into the hands of Jean Cadoret (son of Florette). Cadoret, ably played by Gerard Depardieu, is a hunchback, a tax collector from the city. Soubeyran, who performed manslaughter on the previous owner of the farm, expected to buy the land cheap, but Cadoret, whose mother, Florette, had once been emotionally involved with Soubeyran, has other ideas. He gives in to a dream of simple, country living, and comes to the farm with dreams, schemes, manuals, exotic African squash seeds, and a keen plan for raising rabbits and making a fortune. Cadoret's beautiful wife had been an opera singer, and their sweet daughter, Manon, is named for her best role. In a touching scene, Cadoret and his wife sing a haunting operatic snippet through the window of their new home.

The crusty old farmers laugh as Cadoret starts farming by book. He has a manual for every endeavor, and hopes to make a fortune breeding rabbits. His set-up, wooden crate warrens sunk in dirt, with pipe entrances big enough to let the rabbits in, but small enough to keep foxes out, is brilliant. Soon enough, his horny little rodents are everywhere. In the spring, he surprises everyone with the most, biggest, earliest and best vegetables, sharing them with Ugolin.

Ugolin pretends to help Jean, all the while spying for Soubeyran, and doing nasty things to sabotage the Cadorets. Ugolin is up on the roof, undetected, breaking tiles when the Cadorets first arrive.

Ugolin and Cesar locate and dam up the spring that would make the farm the best in the area. The Cadorets do all right in the spring and early summer, but when the midsummer sun beats down, and they're hauling water with one mule from a distant spring, the sun dessicates everything. Excruciatingly painful to watch, the little family struggles, never knowing the cruel trick played on them. Ugolin wavers in his dirty deeds. He truly likes Jean, and perpetrating the downfall of the little family is hard for him. But at the urging of his uncle, he persists, and the struggle for survival, the machinations of Ugolin and Cesar, and the eventual madness and tragedy befalling Jean and deeply messing up his family are operatic in scale and texture. The acting is superb in every word and gesture. Daniel Auteuil is perfectly cast, and makes much of his part as the grudgingly duplicitous Ugolin. Montand (who has never been better as Cesar Soubeyran), and Depardieu as the tragic Jean fill their roles with as much good and evil as celluloid will support.

At \$17 million, this is the most expensive French film ever, and it was money well spent. This film leaves viewers aching for more—but there's more. The second half of the story, *Manon des Sources* (*Manon of the Spring*), will be out right around Christmas. I for one, can't wait; *Manon des Sources* will provide the perfect Christmas gift for the enthusiastic cinephile.

Living on Tokyo Time

A young woman from Tokyo comes to America for "the American experience." She studies English constantly, gets a job washing dishes in a Japanese restaurant, where, when she needs a green card, she is introduced to a young Japanese-American man, Ken Nakagawa. Ken wants to be a rock and roll star, although he never learns to play his expensive electric guitar, and doesn't do much besides eat junk food and watch TV. He's a janitor in a warehouse by day. Incredibly passive, he's cajoled into marrying Kyoko by Nina, a caucasian waitress at the restaurant, who says it would be good for him—at least he'd have something to talk about. He's too passive to admit to his family that he entered into this marriage of convenience.

Billed as a romantic comedy, there is plenty of gentle humor in the film, but romance is not a big feature here. Most of the humor stems from ethnicity—the constraints of language for those who are not fluent—expectations and compared experience of those who've been raised in vastly different cultures. Some of the exposition is handled by Kyoko speaking directly into the camera, or reading letters she writes to a girl friend in Tokyo. "Today, I met Mr. Ken, a Japanese-American man. We went to dinner, and a Crint Easterrud movie. Then we got married."

The acting is quite good, especially by Minako Ohashi as Kyoko, and Ken Nakagawa as the junk food junkie, in his first acting role, but the concept of a completely uncharismatic character with zero personality is a bit overdone. You would think the sugar in the Kix would give him enough of a buzz to at least do a little mischief from time to time. Still, small character parts are handled well, and the humor perks right along.

A Prayer for the Dying

Something genetically anarchistic in the emotional make-up of Mickey Rourke often transforms films that would be the same old stuff to controversial hot potatoes that leave you wondering what happened. Rourke must bring out all the chance-taking that his directors and colleagues have in them. *A Prayer for the Dying* is Rourke's latest. In it, he plays Martin Fallon, an IRA operative, hiding in a safe house. He wants to quit the group, as the last raid he went on culminated in a bus full of school kids getting bombed—the last straw for him. He's hired by a London racketeer (Alan Bates), to perform a mob hit, which is witnessed by a priest, skillfully played by Bob Hoskins. The mob wants Fallon to kill the priest; the IRA wants him (back, or dead), and the priest is after his soul.

There's a scaffolding inside, and above, the church, which is located across the street from an amusement park. The priest's niece, who lives with him and plays the great old organ for fun, is blind. The racketeer is a mortician (who, strangely enough, has more respect for cadavers than he does for living humans). The symbolism gets a tad heavy. The acting is not bad. Bob Hoskins is perfect as the well-meaning priest with a violent streak that won't be laid to rest. Bates just manages to keep up, and Rourke, with hair dyed red, and a brogue that's pretty good, puts in his usual interesting work. I didn't exactly like this movie, and the excessive symbolism protruded some, but the whole package is provocative, and will stick with you.

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