



Jean-Pierre Bacri as Etienne and Marilou Berry as Lolita.

Resist Power Relationships

Follow your heart.

LOOK AT ME (France, 2004): Directed by Agnès Jaoui. Written by Jaoui and Jean-Pierre Bacri. Produced by Jean-Philippe Andrac, Christian Berard. Cinematography, Stéphane Fontaine. Costume design, Jackie Budin. Production design, Olivier Jacquet. Original music, Philippe Rombi. Starring Marilou Berry, Agnès Jaoui and Jean-Pierre Bacri, with Laurent Grevill, Virginie Desarnauts and Keine Bouhiza. Also, Grégoire Oestermann, Serge Riaboukine, Michèle Moretti. Sony Pictures Classics, 2005. PG-13. 110 minutes. **Winner best screenplay, 2004 Cannes Film Festival.**

The actors in *Look at Me* speak naturally to one another, and they behave in characteristically human ways, which is no small matter in an era when bloated sci-fi action movies and horror flicks pass for hip. Agnès Jaoui's character-driven film is about Parisian acquaintances whose social lives circle around a self-absorbed writer and publisher, Etienne (Jean-Pierre Bacri). Jaoui takes us under her spell and shows us she knows how to spin a wicked tale about her own class of Parisian artists.

Early in the film, Etienne's daughter, Lolita (Marilou Berry), a singer with a lovely voice, rides across Paris in a taxi, talking on her cell with her father a few blocks away. He stands outside the theater where he and his wife Karine (Virginie Desarnauts) have just seen a new movie adapted from one of his novels. When they crowd into the taxi, Etienne imperiously treats the taxi driver — who is not a warm, lovable guy himself — like dirt. Now we know it's not in Lolita's imagination: Her famous father is an ego-bound jerk.

Lolita believes she's unhappy because Etienne doesn't pay attention to her, but actually she's a lot like her father: moody, intense, dictatorial, self-hating. She also thinks guys only pretend to be interested in her to get close to him. Lolita won't embrace Karine either, despite her genuine friendly overtures. Karine is the same age, blonde, slim and beautiful, which dark-haired, zaftig Lolita resents.

Lolita is happy only when she sings with a youthful vocal ensemble, which is preparing for its first concert. She works hard to impress her singing teacher, Sylvia

(Agnès Jaoui), who is married to a depressed writer, Pierre (Laurent Grevill). On the same evening as the taxicab scene, Sylvia recognizes Etienne making his way through a crowd to a party at a club for the people connected with the movie. But Pierre, standing next to her in line with his agent, Edith (Michèle Moretti), bitterly shames Sylvia for celebrity sighting.

On the same night outside the club, Lolita becomes separated from Etienne and Karine, and she can't get into the party. Standing out by the curb, Lolita tries to rouse her father on his cell, when suddenly a young man she doesn't know falls down right next to her, dead drunk. She takes off her coat to cover him, and when Karine comes to get her, Lolita leaves it over Sebastien (Keine Bouhiza).

In these opening scenes we share interesting moments with the primary characters who will figure in the film's story. The ubiquity of cell phones is not haphazard, either. Amid a plethora of communication devices few of these men and women have a clue how to talk to each other about important things. Arguments, leave-takings and emotional scenes ensue. So much is going on, but none of it is being talked about. *Look at Me* could as easily have been called *Talk to Me*.

The task for the characters is to become more themselves, and as they do, it is surprising to see who among them become catalysts for change. We are glad Lolita finds her way to independence and self-acceptance, but there are no real villains in the story, not even her asshole father — although he does have more loathsome characteristics than the others. All are human, which means imperfect.

I love this little movie, not least because it is endowed with the rich voices of "Canto Allegre," an amateur vocal ensemble from Paris that performs as a group or in duos, trios, quartets and quintets. The traditional classical music they sing gives the film an operatic base, as if these real people were also characters in a musical. Opens Friday at the Bijou with my highest recommendations. **EW**

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