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movies BY JASON BLAIR

Torch Songs

The short, tragic life of Edith Piaf

LA VIE EN ROSE: Directed by Olivier Dahan. Written by Dahan and Isabelle Sobelman. Cinematography, Tetsuo Nagata. Music, Christopher Gunning. Starring Marion Cotillard, Jean-Paul Rove, Sylvie Testud, Jean-Pierre Martins, Emmanuelle Seigner and Gerard Depardieu. Picturehouse, 2007. PG-13. 140 minutes. ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

As if to prefigure the trials ahead, *La Vie en Rose* — the majestic new biopic of Edith Piaf — opens with the singer collapsing on stage in New York at the age of 43. Like Piaf herself, one of France's greatest singers, we're at death's door before we're ready. But the film quickly fades back to Piaf at three years old, a child of poor health and poorer circumstances, what with her father at war and her mother on the street. This nonlinear structure, while it requires some patience, cuts easily across a hectic, calamitous life, creating by juxtaposition a sense of the urgent, fragile nature of the artist. *La Vie en Rose* sweeps you up into a bristling, dreamlike vision of Piaf as a constantly embattled ingénue to whom nothing ever came easy. The result is an impressionistic masterpiece. *La Vie en Rose* employs the best techniques of traditional biopic narrative, as do *Ray* and *Walk the Line*, while at the same time rendering them stale and nearly irrelevant by introducing, sparingly but sublimely, elements of fantasy and the supernatural.

The fact that most people under the age of 40 don't know the sound of Piaf's voice isn't her fault. Her genre — pop and cabaret ballads backed by big band — belongs to Madonna now, or did before Madonna bequeathed the throne to Britney with a kiss. Once you hear Piaf's bright, quivering voice, with more vibrato than a fluttering heartbeat, you know how she came to be called "the little sparrow." She was a huge sound in a tiny package, and she lived hugely too: By 1935, a breakthrough year, all the elements of her demise were in place, including the booze, her treatment of subordinates and her penchant for falling in with a dangerous crowd. Raised in a brothel when both parents abandoned her, Piaf suffered from blindness, deafness and reduced health in general, only to be discovered as a vocalist when her father, a contortionist and street performer, needed some impromptu variety in his act. Her success seemed only to increase her troubles; she was suspected of killing the man who discovered her, Louis Leplee (an elegant Gérard Depardieu, thus proving that Depardieu, à la Kevin Bacon in America, is in every French film ever made).

La Vie en Rose is one of those rarest achievements, a film that manages to



exceed your expectations with every passing frame. The crucial scenes — the loss of Piaf's lover Marcel (Jean-Pierre Martins), or her last comeback in 1960 — aren't just effective. They're flawless in composition, music and performance. But this film would not have been possible without Marion Cotillard, whose Piaf is feisty, vulnerable and magnificent to watch. Cotillard's performance is not the best I've seen this year, but the best in many, many years. It is so good, so perfect, at times I had to look away. She holds together what can be a bleak and devastating story, what with Piaf's lifelong commitment to self-destruction. (She reacts to carrot juice like it's battery acid.) The music is crisp and sounds live when it should, with Cotillard providing the best lip-synching possibly ever recorded on film. But her real achievement is playing Piaf convincingly from a boisterous 20 to a cadaverous 47. Cotillard should win numerous awards for her work, but it doesn't matter, because people will be talking about her, and *La Vie en Rose*, for years and years to come.

EW

"DEEPLY PLEASURABLE. A DELIGHT!"
Richard Schickel, TIME

★★★★★ 1/2!
OUTRAGEOUS AND HILARIOUS!
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