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movies BY JASON BLAIR



Célime (Ludivine Sagnier) and Molière (Romain Duris) in *Molière*

The Wages of Love

A speculative film about the French playwright

MOLIÈRE: Directed by Laurent Tirard. Written by Tirard and Grégoire Vigneron. Cinematography, Gilles Henry. Music, Frédéric Tiegnot. Starring Romain Duris, Fabrice Luchini, Laura Morante, Edouard Baer and Ludivine Sagnier. Sony Pictures Classics, 2007. PG-13. 120 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

Historians will tell you that in 1644, Molière — not yet the great dramatist he would become — was released from prison for unpaid debts, after which he went missing for a full three months. While it seems easy enough to speculate what might have occupied the gifted satirist — backpacking in the Pyrenees, perhaps, or sailing through the French Riviera — director Laurent Tirard has devoted an entire film to this question, which still tantalizes English majors to this day. It's a worthwhile concept, this speculative biography, provided the object of speculation is sufficiently beguiling. It worked to perfection in *Shakespeare in Love*, in which an affair between William and the lovely, frustrated Viola transforms "Romeo and Ethel" into the greatest love story ever told. *Molière* doesn't have the inspired casting of *Shakespeare in Love*, not to mention the great Tom Stoppard behind the screenplay, but it's a pleasant diversion nonetheless.

In *Molière*, the young playwright (Romain Duris) is freed from prison by Master Jourdain (Fabrice Luchini), a wealthy nobleman who needs some assistance writing love letters. Jourdain is trying his hand at infidelity, but he lacks the imagination required for it; he'd be grossly immoral were he not so stupid. The contract is simple: Molière is to transmit to Jourdain his "complete knowledge of acting and stage arts" so that Jourdain can catch the eye of a little tart named Célime (Ludivine Sagnier, from *Swimming Pool*). For Molière to receive his money, Jourdain must receive an unmistakable sign of affection from the popular but cold Célime. It's a juicy premise, creating a recipe for disaster that's complicated both by Molière's affection for Jourdain's wife Elmire (Laura Morante) and Jourdain's liaison in his intended affair, the shiftless Dorante (Edouard Baer).

Jourdain comes off as a nitwit for whom art is a means for manipulating people. Naturally, he has many lessons to learn — lessons Molière can provide when he's not chasing Elmire. There are brief echoes of *Cyrano de Bergerac* in *Molière*, but, interestingly, this is a story about maintaining one's marriage — and, by extension, the importance of compromise and forgiveness — as much as it is about sparking an illicit romance. In that sense, *Molière* makes ongoing compromises in terms of tone (farce or drama?) and theme (passion or perseverance?) along the way toward resolution. Unfortunately, we aren't spared an annoying subplot involving Dorante, who claims to be promoting

Interestingly, this is a story about maintaining one's marriage — and, by extension, the importance of compromise and forgiveness — as much as it is about sparking an illicit romance.

Jourdain to Célime but is in fact doing just the opposite, all in a manner that's barely convincing. In fact, Jourdain's obliviousness grows a bit tiring about two-thirds into *Molière*. One wants to feel a greater sense of risk given all the duplicity in the film. But the ending largely redeems the affairs. It's touching and sweet, but not cloyingly so. *Molière* probably wraps up too neatly for some filmgoers, but to me, despite leaving very little to the imagination, the film deserves credit for speculating in the first place.

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