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Elsa Zylberstein and Kristin Scott Thomas
in *I've Loved You So Long*

All the Lonely People

Kristin Scott Thomas blazes quietly – and in French

I'VE LOVED YOU SO LONG: Written and directed by Philippe Claudel. Cinematography, Jérôme Alméras. Editor, Virginia Bunting. Music, Jean-Louis Aubert. Starring Kristin Scott Thomas, Elsa Zylberstein, Serge Hazanavicius, Laurent Grevill, Frédéric Pierrot and Lise Ségur. Sony Pictures Classics, 2008. PG-13. 117 min. ★★☆☆☆

Choosing a single point from which to approach writer-director Philippe Claudel's elegant, mournful *I've Loved You So Long* seems nearly impossible, so let's start with a different kind of impossibility: The film is Claudel's first as a director. A prolific and award-winning novelist in France, Claudel also works as a literature professor. The longer you think about *I've Loved You So Long*, the more this makes sense: The film feels novelistic, from its quiet moments and long looks at still faces to its layers of detail and casual beauty. It's not something to bowl viewers over immediately, but a story to absorb slowly, like a thick book with long descriptive passages.

I've Loved You So Long begins in a cold, anonymous airport lounge, where a petite, sweetly nervous woman arrives to collect an older woman whose face is drawn and pale. Awkwardness sits resolutely between them as the story unwinds: The younger woman, Léa (Elsa Zylberstein), is taking her sister Juliette (Kristin Scott Thomas) home after years of separation. It's some time before the film lets on where Juliette has been, and it's longer still before anyone explains why she was gone — but the short, to-the-point explanation is only a tiny piece of the story. The rest is locked up inside Juliette, in her blank expression and tight lips.

Claudel's film layers distance upon distance: Léa hasn't seen Juliette in more than a decade, during which their parents "brainwashed" her into acting as if her elder sister was dead. Her husband, Luc (Serge Hazanavicius), has never met Juliette before, and initially he nearly vibrates with contained suspicion and distrust. Serge's father lives with the family, but cannot speak following a brain hemorrhage. Juliette and Léa's mother has Alzheimer's and barely recognizes her children. Only

Luc and Léa's elder daughter, whom they refer to as Little Lys (Lise Ségur), crosses the gaps between the adults, and thankfully she doesn't do so too cutely; she's a touch precocious but mostly sweetly naïve.

Slowly and gracefully, *I've Loved You So Long* develops and then begins to close the gaps between people. In long, lingering shots and cautious, steady pans, it establishes its lonely, troubled characters and then brings them together — not without bumps and stumbles, but never overdramatically. Every piece of the film sits together as it should, from the unobtrusive, mostly guitar-based score to the lighting (cold and white at the beginning, warming up as the film progresses) to the performances, which should, in a perfect world, earn awards for every major player. Zylberstein's Léa is fragile, petite, always on the edge of a laugh or tears; her delicate face could go either way. Hazanavicius' part as Léa's husband is relatively small, but he shows Luc's suspicion without overplaying it, and his gradual warming to Juliette is as apparent in the way he comports himself around her as it is in his ability to trust her with his children. As for Scott Thomas, she's simply fantastic, drawn and brusque, clear and sharp in Juliette's tense in-between state. To the discomfort of those around her, Juliette is eminently readable, her sorrow and pain clear on her face though she often says almost nothing. She's back in the world, but she's not really there — not until normal, thoughtful, careful interaction brings her back to herself, to her family, to her feelings.

I've Loved You So Long's end comes quickly — some might say abruptly — but it suits the story. The movie feels, at first, as if it's bottom-loaded with emotional impact, but every scene leading up to the close is responsible for the gravity of the film's last moments. And in those moments, Claudel makes it clear that his film is not concerned with the divide between guilt and redemption, but with the painful, lonely, indescribable place where they overlap.

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