



A Pound of Flesh

Sex and vengeance reside in *House of Pleasures*

HOUSE OF PLEASURES (L'Apollonide (Souvenirs de la maison close)): Written and directed by Bertrand Bonello. Cinematography, Josée Deshaies. Editor, Fabrice Rouaud. Starring Jasmine Trinca, Hafsa Herzi, Alice Barnole, Iliana Zabeth, Noémie Lvovsky. IFC Films, 2011. R. 122 minutes. ★★★★★☆

Prostitution, contrary to that infamous adage, is not the world's oldest profession. The world's oldest profession is the pinch — called sales by some, theft by others — of which prostitution is only a subset. Fucking might be the world's oldest pastime, but the idea of paying for anonymous sex could only arise in the quid pro quo of a market economy. Trade begat currency, and the unsentimental solvency of cold, hard cash slapped a price tag on a piece of ass. Everything else is just love, lust or rape.

At one point in *House of Pleasures*, the new film by French director Bertrand Bonello, a whore propositions her patron by asking, matter-of-factly, "Shall we have commerce?" What a line — Marx, Freud and the Marquis de Sade couldn't have put it any better. I half expected the man to reach into his coat, produce a jar of Grey Poupon and exclaim, "But of course!" No such luck: The only humor exhibited in this strange, beautiful and viscerally affecting movie rises like dust from the gallows floor.

House of Pleasures depicts daily life in the upscale Apollonide, a brothel at the turn of the 20th century. Just whose pleasures are being housed is difficult to say. The movie is inexhaustibly curious about men and women and money and fucking, and remorseless in its desire to probe the nooks and crannies of carnality — every pore, every stray pubic hair — but the results are about as erotic as a colonoscopy. Sex here is only a commodity. It is also, for Bonello, a means of investigating a slew of dark and disturbing issues, both symbolic and literal, including exploitation, perversion, alienation, violence and the insidious slavery of indentured servitude.

The movie is shot entirely inside the labyrinthine bordello, and the crepuscular lighting, coupled with the ragged, tired and often disrobed female bodies, can make characters difficult to distinguish and identify — similar, not insignificantly, to the way it's sometimes hard to tell who is who in war movies. Comprising a sort of

ragtag family of adult orphans unified by their indentured servitude, these women — forever trying to pay off their "debts" to escape the brothel — bond with a kind of battlefield mentality, equal parts tenderness and tough love. As they prepare for an evening's work, their banter is familiar, crude, plaintive and given to crude jokes and constant belittling of the infantile needs of their johns. One whore complains that a regular client is "always asking what I think of his crooked cock," and another causes a chilling fit of laughter when she claims, "fucking is a fucking awful job."

House of Pleasures is a heartbreaking and infuriating film — a eulogy for a bygone age delivered with unprecedented candor and an underlying vibe of terror. And yet Bonello's vision, despite the messy realism and unadorned grit with which he portrays the twilight tragedies of prostitution, is more atmospheric than dramatic; like the work of David Lynch or Terrance Malick, *House of Pleasures* forgoes the tensions and revelations of straight narrative for a kind of brooding, ominous psychology.

The film's characters, however — far from being abstract cutouts of ideas — are all flesh and bone. You ache their aches. What minimal plot there is involves an act of horrible violence and the slow-boiling vengeance that ensues: Madeleine, nicknamed the Jewess (Alice Barnole), is horribly disfigured when a knife-wielding sociopath, playing a game of sadistic seduction, suddenly carves her smile ear-to-ear. Thus an inverted hierarchy of pain is revealed, with Madeleine, "the woman who laughs," plunged to the extreme depths of this slavish hell.

When a newly arrived candidate, Pauline (Iliana Zabeth), tells the Madame (Noémie Lvovsky) she is seeking her freedom through prostitution, she receives nothing but a bewildered laugh. "Fake it during sex," the Madame tells her. "That's how we do it." Pauline ends up paired with a john who makes her dress like a geisha and speak mock-Japanese; another whore is forced to move like a robot, human doll. When Julie (Jasmine Trinca), dying of syphilis, is abandoned by her john, her response is like an epitaph: "Men have secrets but no mystery." **EW**

House of Pleasures opens Friday, Jan. 6, at Bijou Cinemas; info & times at bijou-cinemas.com

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