

the INDEPENDENT

Rendez-Vous with French Cinema (February 29–March 10)

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February 21, 2024

Auction: Pascal Bonitzer: 2023: France: 91 minutes



Louise Chevillotte and Alex Lutz in Auction. (Courtesy of the filmmaker.)

As noted, another picture opens this U.S. Rendez-Vous. But a month ago in Paris, *Auction* was the Opening Night selection in Unifrance's Rendez-Vous. It's director Pascal Bonitzer's ninth film, and surely his smartest, sleekest, most wickedly assured script in a sixty-year

screenwriting career. If you've ever hankered to eavesdrop behind-the-scenes on the high-end auction component of the art marketplace, this is your movie.

Aurore (Louise Chevillotte), a new intern to André Masson (Alex Lutz), a managing partner and auctioneer in a Paris firm, watches silently as her boss smoothly assures a wealthy and bigoted dowager that her million dollar painting will never find its way to a daughter she hates. André has "stacks of clients" like this. What he likes is the hunt—"playing Indiana Jones" and chasing after undiscovered paintings of immense value. Aurore initially plays her role obediently, vowing to "help whore" for her boss. She still leans on her father, who's living modestly, to help cover her rent, and she seems secretly disgusted by the corporate culture she's joined for the money. But as we'll gradually learn, Aurore is a practiced liar, has a hidden family background in rare collectibles, and isn't playing with a full deck, either. (No one does this kind of disguised intrigue better than veteran French moviemakers.)

Meanwhile, in a rural enclave, the scene shifts to a working class family who's just gotten in touch with a local attorney, Mme. Egerman (Nara Hamzawi). The family has in its possession what turns out to be an original 1919 painting of sunflowers by the world renowned artist Egon Schiele. Most of the Austrian painter's "degenerate" and eroticized paintings of women are

known to have been seized by Nazi troops in 1939, under the direction of Adolf Eichmann. The sunflowers' finder is the family son, Martin (Arcadi Radeff), a contented factory worker. The lawyer contacts André, who travels with his ex-wife Bertina (Lea Drucker), another expert art appraiser, to view the canvas. They instantly authenticate it. Looks like André has himself another Indiana Jones whopper payday, this time in the \$10-12 million range for starters. (It's useful here to pause this review and summarize recent news that will quicken your interest in Auction's plot. Last September global media reported on a ceremony and press conference in Manhattan at which seven drawings by Egon Schiele were being returned to their former owner, whose art collection had been stolen by the Nazis during World War II. The early 20th century works were all "voluntarily surrendered" by the collectors and institutions that held them, including the Morgan Library and the Museum of Modern Art.)

As André and his auction house prepare to sell off the abandoned sunflowers painting, the issue of provenance is quickly introduced. Multiple heirs lay claim, and this is where the movie's hijinks really take off. There are more twists and turns, deceptions and betrayals, in Bonitzer's knowledgeable screenplay than in—well, a field of sunflowers. Lutz' adventurous auction head, Drucker's shrewd art buff, Hamzawi's country lawyer, and Radoff's pure-as-driven-snow factory lad are a pluperfect acting company, as is every impeccably cast support person in a big cast. This is one dazzling movie to get deliriously lost in.

Louise Chevillotte's Aurore is the one you'll keep your eye on. There's a scene deep in all the zillion dollar shenanigans that's a dilly. In its way it resembles the centerpiece scene in the 2011 Wall Street drama, Margin Call, which traces a world-class brokerage firm leveraging itself out of existence in a single day. There, the junior trader on the floor, played by Zachary Quinto, patiently explains to the embattled CEO, played by a bewildered Jeremy Irons, a simple basic that Irons long ago forgot. The junior trader becomes the smartest guy in the room. Here, it's Aurore giving a revelatory lesson in auction strategies to André. Only here, at long last, the smartest guy in the room is a woman.

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