Film Notes

by Sue Evans

F RATED

France | 2020 | 119m | 15 tbc | subtitles
Director: Céline Sciamma
Starring: Noémie Merlant, Adèle Haenel, Valeria Golino

Portrait of a Lady on Fire

Writer/director Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* wowed critics at this year's Cannes Film Festival, winning the Best Screenplay award and the Queer Palm, an independent prize for LGBT films. This 'gorgeous' (*Variety*) and 'mesmerising' (*Filmuforia*) film is set in 18th century Brittany, where a noblewoman (Valeria Golino) engages a young artist, Marianne (Noémie Merlant), to paint a portrait of her daughter, Héloïse (Adèle Haenel). It is through the portrait that the Countess hopes to introduce Héloïse to a wealthy husband in Italy.

Sciamma set out to create a lesbian love story free of the male gaze. 'She thought of how the male gaze has always been representing lesbian love stories as conflictual and tragic,' writes Sheena Scott at *Forbes*, 'and she decided that such films should now be portrayed from a female point of view.' During her Screen Talk at the London Film Festival, Sciamma explained she 'really wanted to film desire, the rise of desire. When you remember what it was like to fall in love, you remember the choreography. You remember the steps that led you to that kiss.'

The film provides the context to explore the female gaze at a time in history when women's artistic works were neither valued nor acknowledged. Sciamma said her research confirmed 'the existence of a genuine surge in the presence of women in the art world in the second half of the 18th century. Women painters were numerous and had careers, notably thanks to the fashion for portraits.' Sciamma worked with an art sociologist specialising in the period and artist Hélène Delmaire to create the film's twelve canvases, painted in sequence as filming progressed. Another of her aims was to question the role of the silent, fetishised muse. The balance of the film shifts when Héloïse makes clear that she is not just the passive object of Marianne's gaze – she is observing too; collaborating.

The quiet rhythm of the film was something Sciamma decided on as she was writing the script. She told *High On Films* that she 'wanted to make music a part of the characters' lives, as a rare, desired, precious, unavailable thing.' Héloïse loves music but has never heard an orchestra. Her soundscape is the wind

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What did you think of the film? Please mark or tear the number.

5 Excellent
4
3
2
1 Poor

Please add any further comments here:

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Portrait of a Lady on Fire

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and waves outside, and only the crackle of a fire, a sigh, or the swish of a dress inside, so when the moments of music do occur we understand they are an occasion for joy.

After the contemporary social realism of her previous films – *Water Lilies* (2007), *Girlhood* (2014), and *Tomboy* (2011) – this is Sciamma's first feature with professional actors and her first venture into period drama. 'Paradoxically, of all my films, this is the one where we had the least work to do on the sets,' she explained. 'We shot in a château that had not been lived in or restored and whose woodwork, colours and parquet floors had remained frozen in time. This was a very strong anchor and our work therefore focused more on fittings and props, on materials, wood and fabrics.'

The slow-burn erotic tension in the film is stoked by the central performances of Merlant and Haenel. Merlant was previously nominated for Most Promising Actress at both the César and Lumière awards for *Heaven Will Wait* (2016), while Haenel has been nominated for six Césars, winning for *Suzanne* (2013) and *Love at First Fight* (2014). Sciamma's films have won awards at film festivals around the world, including Cannes, Berlin, Stockholm, Buenos Aires, and Melbourne. She is a founder signatory to 50/50x2020, a French movement with the mission to improve gender equality in the film industry.

Preview screening courtesy of **Curzon**

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About Love

Mon 11 Nov | Chapel Arts Centre | 8:45pm

Archana Phadke | India | 2019 | 91m | nc | subtitles

Living together in a single building in Mumbai, Archana Phadke's family is endlessly engaging. Achieving complete transparency from her parents, siblings, and grandparents, her editing skills produce a story that feels simultaneously personal and universal, presenting the complexities and challenges of cohabitation in close quarters. The general theme is summed up by the title: it's all about love.

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This screening is supported by Anthony & Sylvia Mackewn

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