# Édith Piaf's life in La Vie en Rose: a modern biopic

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**29 June 2007**

*La Vie en Rose*, directed by Olivier Dahan, written by Dahan and Isabelle Sobelman

Understandably there is both widespread curiosity about the lives of well-known people, including the admirable and the less than admirable, and the desire among artists to produce something that might satisfy the public's (and their own) curiosity.

This inquisitiveness has its healthy and less than healthy aspects. It is certainly natural to want to know, in the case of an individual one admires greatly, about the source of his or her gifts or even genius. Certain figures continue to generate apparently inexhaustible interest—Shakespeare, Mozart, Lincoln and others. New books appear each year on the subject of such lives.

On the other hand, we live at a time of diminished opportunities for masses of people. The possibility of their leading fulfilling or semi-fulfilling lives is dwindling. A vast, unprecedented social and financial gap has opened up between "ordinary" people and "celebrities." (See, for example, a film like Ida Lupino's *The Bigamist* (1953), in which Edmond O'Brien and Lupino meet on a bus tour of film stars' homes in Beverly Hills. The homes are large and well-appointed, but they are houses on a street, without high walls, gates or guard dogs.) A sometimes morbid fascination has developed, cultivated by the mass media, in the doings of the rich and famous; this fascination, as we have noted before, may contain explosive dosages of envy and resentment.

A film biography is a very difficult thing to do well. A single real life is a very uneven affair. It rarely divides itself into neat portions. Its "secret" may only be revealed by its totality, without any particular moment disclosing some essential truth. After all, fiction exists for a reason. In fiction the artist rearranges, maximizes, condenses "real life" so that the latter's more profound truths may emerge.

During Hollywood's heyday, the disparate and contradictory facts of various complex lives were all poured into a giant machine, hand-operated by executives, producers, writers and directors (many of them talented), and came out as a more or less homogenous paste, to be applied evenly on the screen in the form of the 'biopic.'

The film industry's concept of 'artistic license' was elastic and expansive. The lives of General George Custer, Emile Zola, Madame Curie, Frederic Chopin, Thomas Edison, the Brontë sisters, Franz Liszt, Abraham Lincoln, Lou Gehrig, Marie Antoinette and many, many others were tossed into the mix, seriously 'reworked' (if not simply replaced with more attractive cinematic versions) and made to conform more often than not to certain predetermined and well-defined themes.

It must be said that an attempt was made to give some general notion of the historical situation in which the given protagonists found themselves and that the themes were usually of a liberal, humanist variety: the need to vanquish backwardness and prejudice, the importance of individuals standing up to tyrannical authority, the value of perseverance and sacrifice in the name of art or science, etc.

Today's film biographers concentrate almost exclusively on the individual situation. Film directors, along with production and costume designers, art directors, set decorators and make-up artists, go to considerable lengths to reproduce particular "period" details with accuracy. For all intents and purposes, the overall artistic effort often begins and ends with such details. Hardly anyone attempts broad historical or social generalizations.

In the new biographical works, writers and directors search out and bring to the fore the personal weaknesses and vices that yesterday's filmmakers (and studios) tried so energetically to conceal. Is this an exercise in increased realism or cynicism? Probably some combination of the two. The modern 'biopic' is more revealing, more vulgar, often more brutal. It has been produced by new conditions and new moods bound up with those new conditions. Is it an improvement? Yes and no. Certainly no one wants a return to the day when a Cole Porter, for example, could be portrayed so dishonestly. The present situation, however, is not satisfying either.

French filmmaker Olivier Dahan's *La Vie en Rose* (*La Môme*) follows the short, unhappy life of French popular singer Édith Piaf, who rose from the streets of Paris to international fame.

Piaf was born Édith Giovanna Gassion in 1915, in the midst of World War I, to a part-Italian mother, who was a street singer and a terrible alcoholic, and an acrobat father. Abandoned by her parents, the girl, a sickly child, lived briefly with her maternal grandmother, a Kabyle (the Algerian Berber minority), and for a longer period of time with her paternal grandmother, a brothel-keeper in Normandy.

She was discovered as a teenager singing in the streets of Paris in 1935 by nightclub owner Louis Leplée; he nicknamed her *La Môme Piaf* (The Sparrow Kid)—she was tiny, 4 foot 8. Not long after he introduced Piaf to Parisian audiences, Leplée was murdered and the singer's underworld acquaintances came under suspicion.

Piaf enjoyed great success from the late 1930s onward. During the war she continued to perform, including for audiences of high-ranking Germans, but her exploits on behalf of the anti-Nazi Resistance are now recognized. In 1944 she took up with and mentored the career of newcomer Yves Montand. The latter, along with his brother, was a militant Communist Party member.

Piaf's great love, by all accounts, was boxer Marcel Cerdan, who died in an airplane crash in 1949. The singer remained popular throughout the 1950s, making a number of visits to the US, where she appeared on television, but she was now addicted to morphine and continued to drink excessively. She died from cancer at 47 in 1963.

Dahan's film covers most of these episodes, with the glaring omission of the war years. His Piaf (Marion Cotillard) is small, anxious and talented, bearing the scars of her childhood spent in brutal and chaotic conditions. Dahan invents a prostitute who looks after Édith and is inconsolable when her father comes back for the little girl. He has her father, performing as a contortionist on the street, push the girl forward during a lull in his act and tell her to 'Do something.' She sings

the *Marseillaise*, winning the crowd's approval. A career begins.

Piaf starts singing in dives, sharing her earnings with a lowlife. Leplée (Gérard Depardieu) discovers her and, almost in passing, is soon found murdered. The film jumps around, from the end of her life to the beginning, then to the middle, and back again. The individual moments are clear enough, but the reason for the scrambling is not.

Piaf, in the film, is nearly always drunk or miserable, or both—the only exception being the brief period of her affair with Cerdan (Jean-Pierre Martins). That may very well be an accurate representation of her life, although the dramatic effect is wearing. Certainly she was one of those performers from a poverty-stricken background who was unable for any length of time to put the misery behind her. One thinks of singers like Billie Holiday (born the same year as Piaf, whom the latter admired greatly) and, from an entirely different musical genre, country music performer Hank Williams. If Chet Flippo's unflattering and rather repetitive biography (*Your Cheatin' Heart*) is to be believed, Williams hardly experienced a single sober or contented day of his adult life, before dying at 29.

Performers like this are martyrs to their own severely damaged early lives, the product of social oppression. And not every film or singing 'star' from a poor background, and they are not perhaps the worst of their breed, ever adjusts to adulation and wealth. For some it's disorienting, even unreal and psychologically destabilizing, to move from deprived conditions into a world of privilege on the basis of one's voice or one's looks. There must be highly conflicting emotions—pangs of guilt about those left behind, resentment against those who have suddenly 'discovered' you, suspicion about the motives of those who are prospering as a result of your efforts, a sense of unworthiness, anxiety about the future, a terror of returning to the early conditions of life and so on. (Flippo writes, for example, that Williams "never believed he had earned the astonishing success that was his; he felt success had been forced upon him, a bitter pill to be choked down daily.")

And they are also martyrs to the emotions they transmit. A critic writes disapprovingly about Piaf and other singers who "wear their hearts on their sleeves." That's a bit too easy. Those emotions were not only hers. She was as much their victim as anything else. One can communicate popular moods too directly. Fans, unhappy in their own skins, unclear about the source of their discontent, look upon you as their voice, perhaps their savior. Insatiable, they can make terrible demands, and a performer may, tragically, attempt to meet all those demands, an impossible task.

Dahan's film is intense and holds one's attention for the most part. Cotillard provides a tour de force performance, based on a serious study of Piaf's life, her voice and movements.

The director told an interviewer: "I didn't want to make a biopic. I wanted to make a portrait so I read every book, every biography, I've met a lot of people, but my only wish was to make something true and honest about her." He is no doubt sincere, but sincerity doesn't solve every artistic problem.

*La Vie en Rose* stumbles over a number of things. The scenes of street and bar life in Paris in the 1930s are somewhat stereotyped, all working class drinking and cursing without let-up. Édith and her friend Mômone (Sylvie Testud) take part in the goings-on. In Édith's one encounter with her mother, the latter asks her daughter for a hand-out and the singer curses her and tells her to get lost. In the fashion of the modern biopic, Dahan leaves none of Piaf's vulgarity or emotional cruelty out of the picture. Why should he?—but the film, at times, has something of a one-note quality.

As Piaf becomes a success, the film's scope narrows, becoming almost claustrophobic. We witness Piaf and her torments, and her torments of others, exclusively. This raises a more substantial difficulty.

Some inner accord must exist between major figures in whatever field and the great collisions or dilemmas of their eras, or else why would they have risen to prominence? A singer is not just a voice, even a great voice, but a human being singing about human problems and communicating to others. The form and content of that communication has a socially significant character.

After establishing Piaf's childhood poverty and traumas, the filmmaker essentially sets her loose from social and historical connections as though "all that" were a settled issue. But other things happened in the twentieth century and some of them must have affected Piaf as well.

What at first appears remarkable and almost incomprehensible—the complete absence of the years 1940-47—has a certain logic to it. Dahan has his Piaf emerge fully formed from childhood and, as far as he's concerned, external events have no more to say in the matter.

Apparently the singer played a role in assisting the underground during World War II. For example, she posed with French prisoners of war as a supposedly morale-boosting effort, but turned the photographs over to members of the Resistance, who made false passports for the prisoners. She later brought the passports to the prison camp, helping some of the detainees to escape. It seems unlikely that Montand, a determined leftist at the time, would have begun a relationship in 1944 with anyone not identified with opposition to the German occupation.

Piaf rose to prominence during the general period of the Popular Front government and the general strike of 1936, when the French working class, only held back by its official leadership, threatened to overthrow the existing order. Is there any connection between the sudden appearance and stardom of a 'street kid' in Paris nightclubs and the larger events? The filmmaker is not obliged to include any particular detail in his work, that's hardly the point, but he surely ought to be striving to make the most sense possible of his subject's life and career.

Detaching Piaf's wildly contradictory life from the larger realities of French social life weakens the film and makes her own behavior somewhat arbitrary. Deprived of the organic intensity that might flow from a more balanced, broader, objective view of things, the filmmaker and the heavily burdened performer are reduced to the tour de force, i.e., generating an artificial intensity. One is gripped by the performance, but not left with all that much in the end.