

La Fille Coupée En Deux, the new film from Claude Chabrol

Hiram Lee
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Directed by Claude Chabrol, written by Chabrol and Cécile Maistre

One may question his consistency or depth, but Claude Chabrol remains one of the few surviving members of the French New Wave capable of turning out interesting work. For his 69th film, *La fille coupée en deux* (*A Girl Cut in Two*), the veteran director has adapted the real-life events surrounding the 1906 murder of architect Stanford White by Harry Kendall Thaw in New York City.

The son of wealthy parents in the coal and railroad industry, Thaw married Evelyn Nesbit, a young artist's model and chorus girl, in 1905. Nesbit had previously been in a relationship with Stanford White, whom Thaw felt had corrupted his new wife. Overcome with jealousy, Thaw shot White at a theater in Madison Square Garden, proclaiming justice served to the horrified onlookers in the audience.

The Nesbit story was previously brought to the screen in a minor but interesting film by director Richard Fleischer called *The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing* (1955). Chabrol's work takes more liberties with the material and places the story in present-day France.

In place of Evelyn Nesbit, Chabrol gives us Gabrielle Snow (Ludivine Sagnier), a TV weather girl pursued by two rival suitors: author Charles Saint-Denis (François Berléand) and Paul Gaudens (Benoît Magimel), the heir to the Gaudens Labs fortune. Snow is introduced in close-up as she presents a weather forecast surrounded by the bright emptiness of a green-screen. The entrance of Snow in front of the green-screen, "out of context," as it were, foreshadows the way in which she will be treated by Saint-Denis and Paul. Paul, in particular, views Snow as an ideal that she can't possibly live up to. His assumptions about her, his hopes as to who she is

or can be to him, supply the "context" by which he will come to love and then judge and betray her. He never truly wants her *as she is*.

Saint-Denis, however, interviewed in the same television studio in which Snow works, is the first to win her heart. The two begin an affair, meeting frequently in the apartment at which Saint-Denis claims to work but which in reality serves as a place to take his latest conquests. The name on the buzzer is Paradis ("paradise").

Snow is rejuvenated by her relationship with Saint-Denis. She feels herself a new woman. "I'm ravenous these days," she tells her mother as she devours a meal at dinner. Sagnier plays Snow with a certain amount of confidence and self-awareness. She's ambitious, hoping to move forward in the world of television, though she's never cunning. Unfortunately, the filmmakers have also written into her character a naiveté that never quite convinces, given what we know about her. She fully believes Saint-Denis will leave his wife for her.

It will come as no surprise to viewers that Saint-Denis does not. He will instead leave for London on a book tour, and bring his romance with Snow to an end, thereby leaving Paul to bring Snow out of her resulting depression.

Among her earliest encounters with Paul, there is a memorable scene in which Snow asks the young man what he does. He struggles to answer her, but finds that he can't. He is an heir, that's all. "You live on your private income," Snow suggests. "More or less," says Paul. "More *than* less," Snow corrects him.

There are times, as in this scene and others, when Chabrol and his actors capture the characters of Paul and Saint-Denis with considerable insight. Saint-Denis often has an air about him that feels correct or rings true. If these are not quite complete portraits—and they are not—one can at least glimpse

something partially revealed in them.

As Snow begins to realize that Saint-Denis will not return to her, she reluctantly accepts Paul's marriage proposal. Significantly, the wedding ceremony isn't shown. Rather, one hears in voice-over the noise of the ritual as the camera slowly pans into the darkened door of a sturdy sanctuary with stained glass windows. Like the marriage itself, there is the artifice, the cold traditional structure, but none of the warmth.

It doesn't take long thereafter for Paul to learn the details—sordid, in his view—of Snow's relationship with Saint-Denis. Their relationship, the viewers will already know, had not been limited to the most conventional forms of sexuality. It's too much for Paul to bear. His ideal woman, "pure as the driven snow," has been made dirty, "corrupted" sexually. Worse, Snow continues to love the writer in spite of Paul's objections. His jealousy is fast transformed into a homicidal rage.

Based as it is on the events of the infamous Thaw-White murder, it will not ruin the film if one reveals there is a shooting. And Chabrol, one must say, has a way with violence. While there isn't so very much of it in his work, his characters do often arrive, hopelessly and desperately, at acts of violence that are committed with a startling suddenness and carried out with surprising rapidity, as in *Les Biches* (1968) or *Le Boucher* (1970). Chabrol is one of the few filmmakers currently working who knows how to handle violence in a meaningful way.

With the violent act committed, an attempt to contain the ensuing scandal by Paul's wealthy family, most especially his cold and calculating mother, begins. This is familiar territory for Chabrol, who has made the secrets and scandals of wealthy families, and the devastating consequences of either keeping or revealing those secrets, a central theme in his work for many years. One finds it in everything from *À Double Tour* (1959) to *La Fleur du Mal* (2003). The director returns to it again and again, but with varied results.

When inspired, Chabrol has something—however limited—to offer. Other times, he has perhaps been guilty of proceeding as if it were all "business as usual." In either case, Chabrol is lacking when it comes to significant social issues. As a result, one feels certain valuable shades and textures missing even in his best work. One sees it in *La Fille Coupée En Deux* as well.

Even when pursuing the more personal aspects of trauma

suffered by his film's many victims, there is a certain distance or coldness that prevents the work from moving us as deeply as it should. As Snow is manipulated by various parties who deceive her for their own gain, one isn't affected by the drama as deeply as one should be. Like Chabrol, perhaps, one registers or observes but does not *feel*.

And yet, for all his flaws, Chabrol does have *something*. There are both striking and telling images in *La Fille Coupée En Deux*, including a very literal interpretation of the film's title during a magic show. Chabrol has a more advanced vocabulary of camera placement and movement than most filmmakers working today. There is a certain pleasure in watching a director like Chabrol tell a story. Too often, unfortunately, those refined techniques of his—so refined that one doesn't notice them unless one is really looking for them—have only scratched at the surface of things. His camera has often been a knife that sliced when it should have stabbed.

La Fille Coupée En Deux is, in the end, a work of some interest, a perceptive and enjoyable film in some ways but not in others. In an artistic climate that finds too little to admire in the cinema currently, there is perhaps the danger of overrating it. With that in mind, one should point out that however much it might impress one at certain moments, Chabrol has been through much of this material before, and with more satisfying results.



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