

✓ ***La Môme (La Vie en rose)* (12A)**

**15<sup>th</sup> December 2008**

Director: **Olivier Dahan**  
France/Czech Republic/UK 2007

Running time : 140 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Marion Cotillard** (Edith Piaf), **Sylvie Testud** (Mômone), **Pascal Greggory** (Louis Barrier), **Emmanuelle Seigner** (Titine), **Jean-Paul Rouve** (Louis Gassion, Edith's father).

SCRIPT: **Olivier Dahan**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Tetsuo Nagata**. EDITING: **Richard Marizy**. MUSIC: **Christopher YOUNG**.

*La Môme* is of course the story, ripe for film treatment, of the life of celebrated *chanteuse* Edith Piaf. We learn how she received her nickname ('the sparrow kid'), inspired by her diminutive size, or perhaps more pertinently by the mismatch between that and her stentorian vocal abilities. We learn too of the life behind her songs and how she did indeed, through them, paint *la vie en rose*.

The film takes a non-linear approach to its subject. We begin from the viewpoint of a critical concert performance in 1959. Weakened by years of drink and drug abuse, and ensuing illness, she collapses, and it is through her muttered prayers as she lies recovering that we witness the events of her life in flashback: her early years spent in a brothel, her itinerant life with her father, her discovery by an impresario and association with his murder, her reformation by a vocal coach, commercial success, stardom, tours, love affairs, car crashes, etc. Much of this is jumbled pell-mell, as if recollected in delirium, and it is up to the viewer to pick up the thread and find his way through the labyrinth of memories.

The biopic is a familiar form to audiences. It was the stock in trade of Warner Brothers in the 1930s, with films about Louis Pasteur and Emile Zola appearing cheek by jowl with their fictional counterparts, such as *Angels with Dirty Faces*. The impoverished upbringings, the abuse, the tragedies and injustices, the successes and reversals; we have learnt to read the signs and feel the great vessel tipping one way or the other almost before it happens.

It has also been said that France's greatest commercial successes of recent years have been those closest to American forms, and Dahan's film came on the heels of *Ray* and *Walk the Line*, both of which have their fair share of adversity, guilt, chagrins of the heart and substance abuse, and the latter of which is also

told in flashback from a point almost at the end of the story.

These things being the case, it may have been Dahan's decisive gambit to arrange his narrative elements in such a way as to make us work a bit harder. Factor in the different actresses employed to play Piaf and the different levels of makeup on Cotillard, and it pays to be a keenly attentive spectator of this film.

I think it pays off well, with the possible exception of one uncomfortable segue after Cerdan's death. The editing is a shot in the arm to the genre, and flings us *in medias res* with visceral impact. The *mise en scène* contributes to this effect: the early scenes around the brothel have an up-close grunginess with carefully chosen props, decor and makeup; the song performances are presented as physical outpourings of the soul, underlining the theatrical cast of the French *chanson*, only more so, one senses. The voice clutches at the throat.

At the centre almost throughout is a phenomenal performance from Marion Cotillard. Anyone who saw her in the *Taxi* films, or *Innocence*, as the dance teacher, will marvel at the technical feat involved in impersonating this tiny-framed individual, so apparently frail by the end, to the point where one starts to wonder whether they used another actress for the later scenes. Leaving aside aspects of stature, there is the voice, the delivery, and the unflinching conviction in all that she says and does that she is who she pretends to be. She received both a BAFTA and an Oscar for her achievement. On this occasion they got it right.

**David Clare**