

Venus Beauty/ Vénus Beauté (Institut) (15)23rd October 2000Director: Tonie Marshall
France 1998

(Subtitles) Running time:- 106 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: Nathalie Baye (Angèle Piana), Bulle Ogier (Nadine), Samuel LeBihan (Antoine Dumont), Jacques Bonnaffé (Jacques), Mathilde Seigner (Samantha), Audrey Tautou (Marie), Robert Hossein (M. Lachenay, the pilot), Marie Rivière (client in fur boots), Micheline Presle (Aunt Maryse), Emmanuelle Riva (Aunt Lyda). SCRIPT- Tonie Marshall. PHOTOGRAPHY- Gérard de Battista. EDITING- Jacques Comets. MUSIC- Khalil Chahine. SOUNDTRACK- "Nuit de Noël" by l'abbé Zurfluh; "Manha do carnaval" by Antônio Maria, François Llenas, Luis Bonfa; "Le Premier Bonhour du jour" by R.J. Renard, G. Biesel; "Sweet Lessons of Love", "You are the Woman" by N. Neidhart, J.M. Marrier; "Samuel" by Patrick Taïeb, Helen Steve; "Rilax No.1", "Relix No.2", "Relix No.3" by N. Neidhart, S. Storch.

Angèle works in a Paris beauty salon with the ingénue-like Marie and cynical Samantha. Their boss is the supportive but businesslike Nadine (an extremely funny and perceptive performance by Ogier, one of Buñuel's bourgeois in *Le Charme Discret...* and the dominatrix of Schroeder's *Maitresse*) who has years of experience in broken hearts and knows how to keep a professional distance. The film charts Angèle's own progress from embittered divorcee to feeling human being through her pursuit by the love-smitten sculptor, Antoine.

We first see Angèle chatting up a total stranger in a railway buffet. This is what she does. She picks up men for casual sex because her faith in the possibility of love left her when her marriage failed (actually she shot her husband, though not fatally). It is ironic, therefore, that a strikingly similar crime of passion causes a turnaround, but... enough said for now.

What delights most of all in this film is Nathalie Baye's performance. Having had to make do for much of her career with Adjani-type roles such as those in *Le Retour de Martin Guerre* or *La Balance*, she has matured to the point where at last she is being offered more interesting work. She invests Angèle with the vulnerability that we have glimpsed in the past, but which carries before it a prickly resilience necessary for survival.

Another great pleasure is the portrait of the beauty salon milieu, which lays bare -rather than covers up - human foibles with typical Gallic frankness. This is not the ersatz world of Cher in *Mermaids*, nor does it adopt the feminist critique that beauty products are emblems of women's self-enslavement to men. Instead it allows both humour and melancholy to let individual cases speak for themselves. The salon is a self-contained world, with its naggingly distinctive door jingle, where different solutions to the single woman's predicament are offered by employee

and customer alike. Nadine tells Angèle: 'When you're not a girl any more, you'd better decide not to be a girl any more.' Samantha is promiscuous but, unlike Angèle, allows her disappointments to affect her professional life, which brings her into conflict with Nadine. But significantly when she tells Nadine where to go, while we may sympathise more with Samantha, Nadine is not made to look petty by comparison (it is possible to imagine how an American film would handle this scene very differently). Marie has a liaison with an injured pilot (Sixties matinee idol Robert Hossein) many years her senior, something Nadine finds it hard to understand until she is turned on by witnessing their nocturnal tryst. Meanwhile Nadine's provincial aunts (Micheline Presle, the director's mother and star of *Boule de Suif* and *Le Diable au Corps*, and Emmanuelle Riva, most famously of Resnais's *Hiroshima Mon Amour* - both too briefly glimpsed here) co-exist in a domestic routine which is comparatively idyllic but envy Nadine's independence and ability to live it up in the big city. No one is happy.

Clearly the sculptor, with his undemanding love, is the key for Nadine (and many another single female, no doubt!) but just how the film makes the transition from her morose rebuttals to melting acceptance is one aspect in which you may feel it betrays its Mike Leigh-style realism by opting for an ending which is too whimsical. We hope this does not spoil the many other qualities of Marshall's film.

By the same director:

If you enjoy *Vénus Beauté* you would certainly like Tonie Marshall's earlier feature, *Pas très catholique*.

David Clare