FILM REVIEWS

Non-Fiction

Produced by Charles Gillibert; written and directed by Olivier Assayas; cinematography by Yorick Le Saux; edited by Simon Jacquet; production design by François-Renaud Labarthe; starring Guillaume Canet, Juliette Binoche, Vincent Macaigne, Nora Hamzawi, Christa Théret, and Pascal Greggory. Color, 107 min., French dialogue with English subtitles. An IFC Films release, www.ifcfilms.com.

Selena (Juliette Binoche), a TV actress, and her husband Alain (Guillaume Canet), discuss his concerns as a publisher about a new nonfiction novel in Olivier Assayas's *Non-Fiction*.

On the heels of back-to-back intense personal dramas—the masterpiece *Clouds of Sils Maria* (2014) and the supernatural suspense thriller *Personal Shopper* (2016)—writer/director Olivier Assayas returns with the lighter, cunning, leavened-with-humor *Non-Fiction*. An engaging change of pace for the French auteur, the film, pitched to American audiences as a "comedy of sex, lies and literature," is certainly very funny, but is better described as an entertaining rumination on perennial questions about how to balance tradition and progress, as well as the nature of art, commerce, and compromise in a new digitized, hypermedia environment.

Non-Fiction explores these concerns via an enmeshed tangle of relationships centered on two couples: Alain (Guillaume Canet), the director of a prestigious Parisian publishing house and his wife, Selena (Juliette Binoche), a successful actor; and their friends Léonard (Vincent Macaigne), a scruffy, acquired-taste, ink-and-paper novelist on the verge of being dropped from Alain's list, and Valérie (Nora Hamzawi), a no-nonsense political consultant. Thrown into this mix is Laure (Christa Théret), hired by Alain with the ominous title of "Head of Digital Transition" and accurately summarized by Selena as "brilliant business school grad, sexual predator style," whose remit is to guide the venerable old firm into the uncharted waters of the digital age. Take these ingredients and stir, and the result is *Doubles vies* (*Double Lives*)—the French title of the movie and a better fit for a film in which four of the five principal players are indeed living lives characterized by various forms of intimate duplicity.

Non-Fiction is attractively shot across stunning locations and over numerous dinner parties and sumptuous meals—one of this director's strengths, dating back to *Irma Vep* (1996) and *Late August, Early September* (1999)—not since Claude Chabrol has going to the movies been so mouthwatering. The assured visual style here is less ambitious than usual for Assayas (some of his films flirt with the dizzying); the less noticeably present camera was surely designed to stay out of the way and let the dialogue do the talking. Which it does, cascading like a waterfall, as these friends talk and debate and talk still more about issues that will be very familiar to readers of this magazine—about print versus digital media, the role of art and criticism in society, and the very mixed blessings of a more "democratic" information culture.

This deep dive into dialogue will be too much for some tastes, though fans of Éric Rohmer and Woody Allen will find themselves at home, immersed in these thoughtful exchanges—and it helps enormously that the performances are uniformly outstanding, with Binoche in particular setting the tone throughout for communicating much with minimalist gestures. (There are easily a dozen arguments in this film, but not one raised voice.) Canet's performance is even more restrained, and it is not hard to see him representing Assayas in the film—an affinity further suggested by the fact that Canet is not only a sought-after actor but a talented director as well (*Tell No One* and *Little White Lies* are his most accomplished films). Alain, like Assayas in several of his films, strikes an ambivalent middle ground between cherishing the treasures of the past and embracing the disruptive, forward-hurtling opportunities of the vital present. In his own social circle, Alain pushes back against the protestations of establishment traditionalism; but among the young enthusiasts starry-eyed about the digital future, he strikes a more cautionary pose. Alain is also something of a director within the movie, as an orchestrator of much of the action, an observer, and, of course, an inveterate talker.

There is nothing wrong with talking pictures. But *Non-Fiction*, like the best of them, is most compelling in moments of subtle understatement, as seen in two conversations about infidelity. "I believe in the implicit," one character declares, preferring to avoid dwelling on the subject, "I know, you know, no need to get bogged down." The second conversation, around a kitchen table, nominally about the portrayal of a character in a novel, is so implicit that it's quite possible to believe they weren't actually talking about adultery. A weakness of the movie, however, is that most of the conversations about its nominal topics of interest are literal, writerly, and even at times pedantic (especially in the first half of the movie, which gains strength as the characters' dramatic arcs increasingly take command of the narrative). Many of the points raised are certainly well-taken—on the pathologies of Internet marketing algorithms that provide comforting reaffirmations of pre-existing beliefs, the overreach of privacy-invading Google, or Selena's laments about a script—but these expositions can have a lecture-hall feel ("I hate revenge, especially when it legitimizes violence").

Other weedy elements of *Non-Fiction* include the plausibility of Léonard's wide ranging and enviable romantic relationships; this is a character whose physical appearance falls somewhere on the Wallace Shawn–Paul Giamatti scale, and Macaigne admirably withholds any performative tricks that might suggest a twinkling charisma hiding behind the facade of a self-centered, vaguely misanthropic personality. That accomplished and attractive women find him irresistible requires a considerable suspension of disbelief. And the film's conclusion, even on a second viewing, is a little pat, abrupt, and closes with a hint of a "let's-not-

take-any-of-this-too-seriously" attitude (the credits roll to "Here Come the Martian Martians") that cuts against the grain of the rest of the picture, which is not a farce, but a serious film that happens to be very funny.

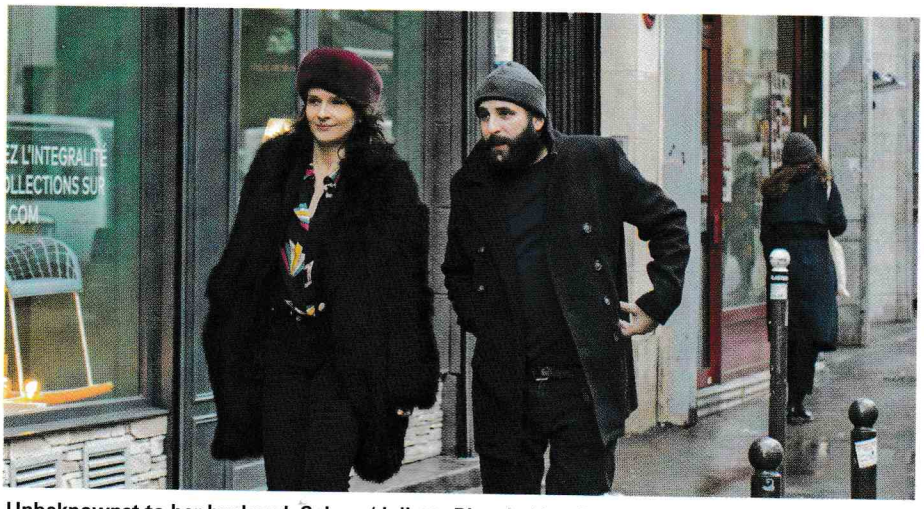
But these protestations are qualifiers—the strengths of *Non-Fiction* are substantial and estimable. Assayas, working with familiar collaborators (including producer Charles Gillibert, cinematographer Yorick Le Saux, production designer François-Renaud Labarthe, and, of course, Binoche, in her third film with the director), has fashioned an unfailingly enjoyable, sharp-witted film that moves briskly and has something to say. And despite working in a new genre (his movies are usually pretty weighty), *Non-Fiction* is nevertheless recognizable as an Assayas film. Even here (in the fragment of a mysterious phone conversation Laure fields after a tryst with a furtive lover) there are the familiar hints of the vaguely conspiratorial, à la *Demonlover* (2002) and *Boarding Gate* (2007).

Also familiar, and more central to *Non-Fiction*, are its ruminations about the distinction between "high art" and "low art"—a recurring motif explored most recently in *Sils Maria*, and present here both in the literary world with the creeping encroachment of blogging and even Twitter, and in Selena's mixed feelings about starring in a popular television series—and, as already noted, the competing lures of tradition and progress (a dilemma at the heart of Assayas's *Summer Hours* [2008], and *Les destinées* [2000], a three-hour turn of the century period piece about the fading of the dedicated craftsmanship of the old world). *Non-Fiction* suggests no easy answers to these quandaries, but Assayas tips his hand with an invocation of the ultimate cinematic authority, when at one low moment Alain compares his lot as the lonely custodian of worthy texts with that of the desolate pastor in Bergman's *Winter Light*.

Non-Fiction takes a different approach to these issues—with running gags about how best to describe Selena's TV show (is she a cop or a crisis management expert?) and the description of some risqué sexual intimacy in a movie theater, purportedly in the midst of a screening of Michael Haneke's *The White Ribbon*. Actually, that heady episode took place during *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, and the switch makes for the best joke on that particular topic since the *Seinfeld* episode when Jerry was seen necking during *Schindler's List*. But more pointedly, Léonard, who fancies himself as having made noble sacrifices in order to be true to his (marginally commercial) literary career, can't bring himself to admit that he would see such mass entertainment fare as *The Force Awakens* (and that he has never seen *The White Ribbon*)—even in his autofiction.

Autofiction, short for "autobiographical fiction," is Léonard's writing style: he conjures novels that recount slightly altered versions of events in his own life—to call them "thinly veiled" would be an exaggeration. (Attempting to confess a past transgression to Valérie, she responds, "I know, you wrote a book about it.") This literary approach, not surprisingly, has left a long trail of unhappy former friends and lovers in its wake, none of whom signed up to have their own private lives serve as someone else's source material. The practice of auto-fiction raises still more questions about the responsibilities of art, the pressures of commerce (Léonard can't write any other way), and the relationship between fiction and nonfiction, or, put another way, between art and life.

Indeed, although it was first known as "E-book" in preproduction, "Autofiction" would have been an apt title for the movie (more fitting, if less commercially viable, than *Non-Fiction*)—though not quite as spot on as *Doubles Vies*, which focuses attention equally on all of the characters (and even some of the peripheral ones). But by whatever name, *Non-Fiction*, shrewdly introduced at one North American festival screening as "the most French movie you will ever see," is a minor but eminently enjoyable and more than welcome addition to Assayas's oeuvre.—**Jonathan Kirshner**



Unbeknownst to her husband, Selena (Juliette Binoche) has been involved in an affair with the controversial nonfiction novelist, Leonard Spiegel (Vincent Macaigne), in *Non-Fiction*.

An Elephant Sitting Still

Produced by Dongyan Fu; written and directed by Hu Bo, adapted from a story in Hu's novel, *Huge Crack*; cinematography by Fan Chao; production design by Xie Lijia; sound by Ren Yiming; edited by Hu Bo; music by Hua Lun; starring Peng Yuchang, Wang Yuwen, Zhang Yu, Liu Congxi, Ling Zhenghui, Dong Xiangrong, Zhang Xiaolong, Wang Ning, Li Danyi, Kong Wei, Kong Yixin, Wang Chaobei, Wang Xueyang, and Zhuyan Manzi. Color, 230 mins., Mandarin dialogue with English subtitles. A Kimstim release, www.kimstim.com.

One night in Beijing, where I lived and worked for two years (2014–16), a colleague said, "You can't know the sadness so many Chinese experience." The colleague said this in a nice bar/restaurant in the capital's sleek, upscale Central Business District (CBD) area, home to many high-growth corporate and media companies, and just east of Tiananmen Square, China's national center. Few Chinese around me or with whom I worked seemed sad, at least in an outward way, and sadness is about the last thing that strikes you walking around CBD, where Rem Koolhaas's wild, revolutionary skyscraper housing China TV hints at a monumental playfulness that New Yorkers could have only hoped for with the rebuilt World Trade Center. At worst, the place expresses an overt, preening monumentality, New China showing off. Sadness? Not really.

I said something along these lines. My colleague said, in a veiled, respectful way, this was just my blinkered view as an English-speaking expat. Outside of the top-tier cities (Chinese cities rank in multiple tiers of descending affluence and power, led by Beijing and Shanghai), the country remains very much so-called "Third World," with great gaps in development, access to opportunities, social mobility, education, and, as you go further west, nutritional levels. Deprivation, worker exploitation, and alienation—along with the kinds of terrible schisms faced by millions of Chinese shifting from an agrarian to an urban existence that Jia Zhangke has depicted in many of his movies—has even led to waves of suicide.

The late director Hu Bo, whose suicide in October 2017 marks an immeasurable loss to independent Chinese cinema, made only one feature movie. But *An Elephant Sitting Still* is enough in itself to comprise a career, a bit like Jean Vigo (who also made a few shorts) and *L'Atalante* (1934). (Hu also made a short, *Man in Well*, a postapocalyptic horror story that premiered at last year's Locarno Festival, seven months after *Elephant* made an already legendary premiere in Berlin's Forum.) Set in a nameless northern city—only slightly less oppressive than another indelibly bleak northern town cap-

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