



NEW RELEASES

Annette

SPOILER WARNING The following notes give away the film's ending.

The death of cinema has been proclaimed so frequently across the medium's relatively short lifespan that the notion is now a cliché. Still, the pandemic managed to sound the knell with renewed force. And when last year's Cannes Film Festival, after a postponement and much demurral, was finally cancelled, the decision's symbolism struck as particularly dire. If Cannes 2021 is to represent cinema's glorious rebirth, as festival director Thierry Frémaux and co. certainly intend it to, then opening with the new film by Leos Carax, a director whose every outing is at once a celebration and a reinvention of the art form, was brilliantly apropos.

In fact, the legendary critic Serge Daney long ago anointed Carax cinema's saviour during the festival, back in 1984, upon discovering the then-23-year-old's debut *Boy Meets Girl*. The exceptional cine-literacy that so impressed Daney has since become Carax's signature, as his films continue to draw openly and liberally from past genres and masters.

That *Annette*, his sixth feature and first in English, should be a musical is the culmination of a movement discernible across his oeuvre. Scenes such as Denis Lavant's sprinting, spasmodic dance to David Bowie's 'Modern Love' in *Mauvais Sang* (1986) and its mixtape upgrade in *Les Amants du Pont Neuf* (1991), with Lavant and Juliette Binoche hurling themselves across the Pont Neuf in Paris while the sky explodes in a million colours during the Bastille Day fireworks, already expressed a keen affinity with musicals. And the succession of spectacular set pieces that make up *Holy Motors* (2012) could easily have structured one, a potential underlined in the finale when Kylie Minogue brings the narrative to its emotional climax by bursting into a song whose Disney-like lyrics Carax had written.

The soundtrack for *Holy Motors* also included 'How Are You Getting Home?' by Sparks, the duo made up of brothers Ron and Russell Mael, who would later send Carax a treatment idea for a musical, along with some 20 demos, which eventually became *Annette*. The kinship between band and director is hardly surprising: both are pop pioneers in their respective idioms who revel in mixing high sophistication with oddball, often puerile humour.

What it has engendered is a script with dialogue composed of lyrics replete with dorky rhymes – though in large part delivered in recitative à la Jacques Demy – and very likely the only musical ever to contain not just one but two scenes of cunnilingus. In the first, the couple alternately sing 'We love each other so much!' until they climax in unison with the song, while the second occasions a masterpiece of a match cut from the ecstasy of orgasm to that of childbirth ('Breathe in! Breathe out! Push, push!' sings a chorus of doctors and nurses).

This interplay between the high and the low is embodied by Adam Driver and Marion Cotillard's lovers: Henry is a stand-up comedian, Ann is an opera singer; he dresses in green, she in red; 'I killed them,' he says of his audience after a show; 'I saved them,' she replies about her own. The dialectic extends to the film's form, as Carax employs a hypermodern aesthetic to tell an archetypal story of showbiz romance that turns from idyll to tragedy.

The saturated palette of Caroline Champetier's emphatically digital photography renders even real locations artificial, so that the film can move effortlessly from the streets of downtown Los Angeles to a Cocteau-like magical forest, to a boat caught in a raging rear-projected storm, to a concert attended by tens of thousands in a stadium fully rendered in CGI.

Of the myriad outlandish touches, the most out-there must be that Henry and Ann's baby daughter Annette is portrayed by a disconcerting marionette with visible joints like Pinocchio, hair like Chucky and a face like Anomalisa (as well as jug ears like her father). It is never not funny when the parents cuddle and sing to this grotesque little monster, doting on her as if she were an angel.

Where the film isn't balanced is in the interest Carax shows for his lead actors and their respective characters (something that holds true for all his features except *Les Amants du Pont Neuf*). Cotillard, whose singing is aided in postsynch by professional soprano Catherine Trottman, is given little to do in her opera scenes, and since Ann serves as the saintly counterpart to the ever more demonic Henry, she's inevitably less compelling. Driver, on the other hand, gets to step in for Denis Lavant and show off his physicality, contorting himself through two virtuosic stand-up sequences, and from the halfway point it becomes in effect a one-man show. (There's actually another character, a conductor and love rival played by Simon Helberg, but he's barely an afterthought.)

Undoubtedly, the bias stems from Carax's personal investment in Henry. In that review from 1984, Daney noted the strong personal dimension to the budding auteur's film, recognising Lavant's protagonist as an alter-ego. This too has since become a trademark and *Annette* may well be his most nakedly autobiographical work. Anyone unfamiliar with Carax's life might not necessarily pick up on a short moment in the prelude when, in a recording studio with Sparks, he asks a teenage girl called Nastya to join him by the console. Her identity becomes clear in the finale, which sees Henry in jail and, through cosmetic trickery, bearing a striking resemblance to Carax. Annette comes to visit and after transforming into a real girl (Devyn McDowell) she confronts him in a duet, laying bare the suffering caused by his egocentrism. It's the one song that relinquishes drollery in favour of pure emotion and it lends a new, devastating perspective to the spiralling darkness of the film's second half.

It isn't crucial to know that Carax's partner, the actress Yekaterina Golubeva, died in 2011 when their daughter Nastya was six years old, and of course it would be foolish to read *Annette* literally as a *mea culpa*. Nevertheless it's remarkable that Carax should want to wrestle his demons so publicly. And it is our privilege that he keeps doing so.

Giovanni Marchini Camia, *Sight and Sound*, September 2021

ANNETTE

Directed by: Leos Carax
Production Companies: CG Cinéma International, Tribus P Films International, Arte France Cinéma, Theofilms, UGC, Detail Film, Scope Pictures, Wrong Men, RTBF (Télévision Belge), Eurospace Piano Garidi Films
Produced by: Charles Gillibert, Paul-Dominique Vacharasinthu, Adam Driver
Co-producers: Fabian Gasmia, Geneviève Lemal, Benoît Roland, Arlette Zylberberg, Kenzo Horikoshi, Julio Chavezmontes, Consuelo Frauenfelder, Grégoire Melin
Screenplay: Ron Mael, Russell Mael
Story: Ron Mael, Russell Mael, Leos Carax
Director of Photography: Caroline Champetier
Editor: Nelly Quettier
Art Director: Florian Sanson
Costumes: Pascaline Chavanne
Make-up & Hair: Bernard Floch
Marionettes: Estelle Charlier, Romuald Collinet
Music and Songs: Sparks [Ron Mael, Russel Mael]
Music Supervisor: Pierre-Marie Dru
Executive Music Producers: Pierre-Marie Dru, Marius de Vries

Cast

Adam Driver (*Henry McHenry*)
Marion Cotillard (*Ann Desfranoux*)
Simon Helberg (*orchestra conductor*)
Devyn McDowell (*Annette*)
France/Germany/Japan/Belgium/Mexico/

Switzerland/USA 2020
139 mins

NEW RELEASES & RE-RELEASES

Souad
Continues from Fri 27 Aug
Wildfire
From Fri 3 Sep
Candyman
From Fri 3 Sep
Annette
From Fri 10 Sep
Sweet Thing
From Fri 10 Sep
The Maltese Falcon
From Fri 17 Sep (preview + extended intro on Wed 8 Sep 17:50)

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