

ARTS

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Marion Cotillard deserves an Oscar for her performance as Edith Piaf in 'La Vie en Rose'. She captures the essence of the character despite miming the songs

The woman with Paris in her voice



La Vie en Rose
CERT 12A, 140 MIN

FILM REVIEW
Freddie Sayers

Right from the opening scene, in which we cut from Edith Piaf singing "Mon Dieu" in a childhood moment when her drunken mother sings on the street and a scene of men rushing through corridors to call an ambulance, *La Vie en Rose* announces itself as a different kind of biopic. Instead of following a chronological timetable – girl sings, is discovered, becomes a star, has fall from grace – Olivier Dahan's script presents the life of Edith Piaf as a work of art. If at times it is confusing, silly and melodramatic, so much the better: such was the life of Piaf, and this film is a poetic, fitting version of her life.

Firstly, it is faithful to the astonishingly fractured nature of Piaf's life. Brought up initially by her alcoholic mother, snatched aged five by her father, deposited at her grandmother's Normandy brothel, taken away again aged 10 to tour with her father's travelling circus for five years; the young

Edith Gassion was never in one place for long. "C'est la fille de qui?" asks one of the punters at the brothel. "De personne," responds the madame.

It is true that this scatty technique leaves some questions unanswered. Soon after she is "discovered" on the streets of Belleville by Louis Leprieux (Gérard Depardieu), he is murdered at the hands of a pimp with whom Edith is still somehow involved. Whether she was actually a prostitute, and the nature of her involvement in his murder, remain a mystery; similarly, her best friend and drinking partner Mominie, who always seems to be at her side, morphs by the end into a bitter rejected lover figure in a way that is never explained.

What becomes clear instead is that this is the film equivalent of an impressionist painting: the imagined impression that Piaf had of her own life, partly the impression of the film's writer-director. Facts are less important than memories, so that her life ends up worth more than the sum of its parts. For instance, a crucial detail about her early life is withheld until 10 minutes before the end, when Edith is on her deathbed; this painful memory had been suppressed by Edith until that final moment when, like the final plot flourish in a Guy de Maupassant story, she releases it to full effect.

If you approached it this way, you can start to understand that what appear to be the film's weaknesses or absurdities are actually virtues from Piaf's experience. The slight over-the-topness of the sets and costumes, the

appetite for high drama, the dreaminess of the whole thing, is thoroughly appropriate to Piaf's own version of events. The showpiece scene in this regard is her discovery of the death of the pugilist love of her life Marcel Cerdan in a flying accident: in a semi-dramatic sequence she imagines that he has come to surprise her, and it is only as she wanders around her grand apartment and sees the sorrowful faces of her entourage that she discovers the bad news, at which point she tearfully walks straight on to the stage and starts

singing. Melodrama perhaps, but I loved it.

Movies usually try to have at least one of these big show-stopper moments of drama: *La Vie en Rose* consists of nothing but. You are lurching from one big scene to another, and the absence of low or comic bits in between means that you become immunised to them. Like the drugs to which Piaf became addicted the doses of drama have to become bigger and more powerful in order to stir us. The first time she sings – the national anthem – at her father's circus show; her visions of St Thérèse de Lisieux, the guardian saint who watches over

her; the moment when Marlene Dietrich comes to thank her from the bottom of her heart for "carrying Paris in her voice"; the prematurely aged twitzy energy to her hat captivates. Cotillard shaved back her hairline and showed off her eyebrows to look more like Piaf before even meeting the director: when she got the part she studied the way Piaf sang for months so she could learn to breathe at exactly the right moments. It is an Oscar-worthy performance.

As for Piaf herself, you are left with a mystery. Her occasional eloquence remains at odds with her drunken ramblings; her shyness conflicts with her love of performance. She never explains herself in this film – we never get a scene saying why she sings or what she lives for. She just seemed to live, day by day, expressing herself in the only way she knew how. And as the re-mastered soundtrack of her greatest songs shows, thank God she did.

Ultimately what saves this film and makes it so wonderful is the performance of Marion Cotillard as Edith Piaf. Although she necessarily mimed the songs, she captures the essence of this tiny, bird-like woman. Not at all beautiful, at times out of control, totally uneducated, Piaf charmed the world with her raspy vibrato and Cotillard brings a twitzy energy to her hat captivates. Cotillard shaved back her hairline and showed off her eyebrows to look more like Piaf before even meeting the director: when she got the part she studied the way Piaf sang for months so she could learn to breathe at exactly the right moments. It is an Oscar-worthy performance.

A teary farewell to MacMillan's muse

BALLET REVIEW
Dennis Chang

Romeo and Juliet

METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE, NEW YORK

If a survey were to be taken of all the ballerinas in the world as to which of their present colleagues they most admire, Alessandra Ferri's name would come very near the top. Many of these stars were in the audience last weekend for her final performance with the American Ballet Theatre at New York's Metropolitan Opera House. If Ferri's name rings any bells on this side of the Atlantic, it is because she was very briefly the Royal Ballet's most promising young star in the early 1980s. Sir Kenneth MacMillan discovered the precocious 15-year-old Italian in the Royal Ballet School and gave her the role of Juliet, Mary and a host of new roles when she was barely out of her teens. With her jet-black hair, crescent-shaped feet, lusciously playful back and magnetic dark eyes, seemingly able to convey anything, she was MacMillan's dance actress made in heaven, the heir apparent to his greatest muse, the legendary Lynne Seymour. What a blow it was then when Mikhail Baryshnikov lured Ferri to join the American Ballet Theatre in 1985. She had to give up many uniquely British roles that would have suited her strengths and temperament, even if the ABT's flexible structure allowed her to pursue a varied international career.

It's not surprising that Ferri's greatest roles remained the MacMillan epics, more specifically *Romeo and Juliet* – the ballet that first introduced her to the world and with which she would close her final chapter. Ferri's Juliet is both a classic and a familiar fixture. More than 20 years on, her making her first film of the ballet her last Juliet was, as always, pure, shy, aristocratic, impressionable and searing with intensity.

Ferri shed 30 of her 44 years from the second she burst on to stage. Her big eyes seemed to filter every thought through a glaze of tears – from the purest innocence at the outset to the wonderment of her first meeting with Romeo, the inflamed passion of the balcony scene, the despair of parting in the bedroom and the final spiralling into the abyss. I shall always remember her desperate dash for Friar Laurence – her green shawl rippling above her flying hair – an extraordinary moment of power and beauty that at once crystallised Ferri's fearlessness and Grecian elegance.

In contrast to the Italianate high drama of Ferri's farewell, 49-year-old Kyra Nichols's last performance with the New York City Ballet, George Balanchine's choreographic temple, had the ritualistic yet fervent atmosphere of a high priestess being ordained into the pantheon. Like Ferri, Nichols could not resist loving and dying on stage one final time. She chose Balanchine's deeply spiritual *Serenade* (1934) and melancholic *Davidshindlerintze* (1980) – two very different works from the two ends of the choreographer's life. If *Serenade* is a wordless hymn to ballet and womanhood, Nichols was an inspirational matron, demonstrating to her younger followers the dedication and discipline required of their art form. In *Davidshindlerintze* ("Dances of the League of David"), she was an affecting Clara Schumann, the wife of the composer. Robert, whose mental illness was to turn the couple's hard-earned domestic bliss into despair.

Unlike Ferri, Nichols ended her night with one of the most glittery and joyous of all Balanchine ballets – the *Rosenkavalier* section of the *Vienna Waltzes*. Set against a large mirror in an empty ballroom, waltzing couples in white gowns and tails entered and exited until Nichols came on waltzing by herself – seeming perfectly content. Or was she? Before one could decide, an unparticular Philip Neal appeared and asked for a dance. Delighted by each other's company, they exited inconspicuously to resume their rendezvous elsewhere as the ballroom eventually filled to the brim with 48 swirling dancers. It was a happy ending for Nichols even though her ball gown was stained with tears. She is one of the two remaining dancers in the City Ballet to have danced for Balanchine himself, and her retirement severs another link between the company and its founding father.

Companies evolve and styles change. One of the City Ballet's most talked-about young stars, Sofiane Sylve, made her British debut with the English National Ballet in Derek Deane's staging of *Swan Lake* in the round. Beautiful, darkly glamorous, and blessed with stupendous musculature, Sylve has all the ingredients of a superstar. On her first showing, Sylve's flashy technique had not yet completely adjusted to the temperament of the Swan Princess Odette or the evil Black Swan Odile. Her naturalistic acting failed to project in the cavernous Royal Albert Hall, where everything from the orchestra to the number of swans was necessarily amplified. She may have the strongest and quietest feet I have ever seen, but *Swan Lake* requires more soul and conviction. I look forward to her next London visit with the New York City Ballet in spring 2008, in a production that, I hope, she believes in.

PUERI CANTORES PLOCENSES UK TOUR 2007



Westminster Cathedral, Sung Mass 6 pm
Saturday 7th July

Mass at Sts Gregory & Augustine, 10.30 am
Woodstock Road, Oxford
Sunday 8th July

Mass at Oxford Oratory, 6 pm
Wednesday 11th July

Metropolitan Cathedral, Liverpool
Vespers, 5.45 pm
Thursday 12th July

Christ the King Church, Coventry
Concert at 7.30pm
Friday 13th July

St Chad's Cathedral, Birmingham
VICI, MASS, 4.30pm
Saturday 14 July

Mass at Christ the King, Coventry
Sunday 15th July, 9am

Mass at St Stanislaus Kostka, 11 am
Coventry, Sunday 15th July



No stranger to spin

ART REVIEW

How We Are: Photographing Britain
TATE BRITAIN, UNTIL SEPT 2

"How We Are," declares Tate Britain in the title of its new exhibition of British photography. The implication here is that photography is a window on to the world, a snapshot of society. The "are" is curious, though, given that the exhibition stretches from the 1830s to the present day: have we not changed at all over almost 200 years?

For a short answer, one could compare the opening and closing images of the show. To start, a series of small, grainy black-and-white portraits of Queen Victoria. She is a diffident sitter, tired perhaps from posing at length for those early soft exposures, but faithfully enacting a different persona in each shot: mother, wife, ruler. Fast forward some 180 years to the Iraq war and to Alastair Thain's massive colour head shots of three Royal Marines. Their faces loom out of the shadow in expressions of painful exhaustion, the aftermath of an intense training session. A drop of sweat is as large as my fist. It's the equivalent of going from silent black-and-white movies to eye-popping CGI blockbusters. But, technical progression aside, how much has really changed? Both sets of images are exercises in careful choreography: on one hand, the accomplished

monarch; on the other, the tragic, youthful face of war. Photography, even in its inchoate form, was no stranger to spin.

For social activists, the camera became a powerful tool of persuasion. Lena Connell's studio portraits of suffragette leaders are a case in point. Mindful of the charges levelled at these proto-feminists – they were regularly lambasted in the press for lacking femininity and reason – Connell's camera issues a subtle riposte. Her sitters look calmly, and directly, at the camera. There are no traces of hysteria or militancy.

Other photographers were more brazen in their efforts to manipulate. Alfred George Buckham, a reconnaissance pilot during the First World War, produced a series of stunning aerial shots of British cities, complete with planes hovering in the tumescence clouds. He described how he achieved the feat: "If one's right leg is tied to the seat with a scarf or piece of rope, it is possible to work in perfect security." Buckham was eventually discharged from the airforce after crashing nine times – and his heroic pictures were exposed as fakes.

Charlie Phillips, whose images of Notting Hill residents in the late 1960s are included in the show, said: "What makes a good photograph is to be honest." Are Buckham's photographs made less valuable by his trickery? They are still breathtaking images, superimposed planes or not. Modern news photography fares little better under

Phillips's dictum: the *Daily Mirror's* infamous staged shots of tortured Iraqis, or the doctored images of a bomb-blasted Beirut for which a witness's own eye-witness evidence enough. An arch wisp of smoke; a retouched wrinkle; a slimmed down thigh. The urge to document, and to document truthfully, was, however, something which gripped photographers in the second half of the 20th century. As post-war reconstruction began to change the urban landscape, photojournalists took to the streets to record the human face of inner city poverty. Shirley Baker's record of the slum clearances of Salford in the mid-1960s is a powerful example of the "truth-seeking" camera.

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Queens to street urchins to soft furnishings: the British camera is a promiscuous machine, finding, if not beauty or truth, then at least intrigue in all things.

Elaine Hoko

Philosophy in the Catholic Tradition

"Christian philosophers can develop a reflection which will be both comprehensible and appealing to those who do not yet grasp the full truth which Divine Revelation declares." Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (104).

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