

Wednesday, July 30, 2008

REVIEWS

'L'ORIGINE DE LA TENDRESSE' AND OTHER TALES

Rated:NR

The half-dozen short films gathered into this smart and lively omnibus could all easily survive as solid works on their own individual merits, but are fortunately being presented together in theatres under the "World According to Shorts" banner, giving them that much more of a chance of actually being seen. The collection is programmed by Jonathan Howell (who's been putting together the annual "World According to Shorts" foreign short film program at Brooklyn's BAMcinematek since 2000) and makes for an eclectic mix that may seem odd at first but is ultimately much better for it in the end.

Guillaume Martinez's *Pen-pusher* is a smart selection for the opener. It's a tasty aperitif that unfolds on a Metro train where a scruffy Paris-chic young man and woman sitting next to each other communicate by underlining series of words in the books they're reading. Flirty and light without overdoing it, the film puts its romantic premise into a real-world situation (the awful, cramping proximity of strangers on the train) that helps throw a little sand under the wheels of a story that could easily have been too twee by half.

Following that, *L'Origine* turns more sober-minded, with a trio of nonfiction pieces (each about a quarter-hour) that run the gamut of documentary presentation. The first and most affecting is Felipe Canales' *My Mother: Story of an Immigration*. A biographical portrait of Canales' mother, who left Algeria in 1956 to join her husband in Paris, the film's story of generational change is told via stark black-and-white photographs (Canales works as a photographer) and a narration of lilting regret.

After the sharp particulars of Canales' piece, Jeanne Paturle and Cecile Rousset's *One Voice, One Vote* is hard to take as much of anything. An animated meditation on the importance of voting, viewed from the perspective of the run-up to the 2007 election, it's too wispy to have much impact; it's the cinematic equivalent of a short conversation with a knowledgeable friend. Dealing more in practicalities is Olivier Bourbeillon's *The Last Day*, which chronicles the end of an era in straightforward documentary style. In 2005, the "power hammer" in a smithy at the Brest naval works went out of operation; the film is an appreciation of the raw muscle power and closely attuned skill that went into its sweaty, jarring operation. Bourbeillon's recreation of the hammer's operation (reenacted by the last three men who worked on it) is a respectful ode to the West's now-disappearing tradition of prideful hard labor.

The title film is not just by far the longest at a little over a half-hour, but also the oldest (produced in 1999, whereas all the others date from 2005 to 2007), a fact that shows in its rather stillborn presentation. The sort of static portrait that flourished in American art houses not so many years ago, Alain-Paul Mallard's *L'Origine de la tendresse* follows a lonely woman, Elise, who works as an attendant in a museum. Stone-faced and slightly heavy (facts the film almost seems to rebuke her for), Elise appears to live the unobserved life to its fullest, staring off into space at her job and only occasionally interacting with friends or co-workers. A sexual interlude is as brief and cold as it is unsatisfying. The film plays itself out with a cool and reserved humor that nevertheless becomes tiresome well before its running time is up.

Downshifting rapidly into domestic farce, the program concludes with Alice Winocour's *Kitchen*. Here, the otherworldly Elina Lowensohn has to overcome two tasks. First, she must convince us that she can play a homebody of a housewife who seems to have nothing to do all day but cook for her husband (once upon a time it would have been like casting Isabella Rossellini as a mousy grade-school teacher). Second, as her character she must find a way to kill the still-alive lobsters she has brought home to cook. The process of dealing with the squirming crustaceans quickly escalates from uncomfortable queasiness to cold homicidal rage. Never has the phrase "What would you like for dinner?" taken on such horrid consequences.

Critic: Chris Barsanti