

## "A Very Long Engagement" Is Very, Very Good: Also, "Ice Princess"

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 29 March 2005 18:00

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### **A VERY LONG ENGAGEMENT**

Its love scenes are like *Titanic* meets *The English Patient*, its battle scenes suggest what might happen if the Coen brothers remade Kubrick's

*Full Metal Jacket*

, and yet

*A Very Long Engagement*

is enormously enjoyable; this mad amalgam of genres and styles seems almost tailor-made for the talents of its director, Jean-Pierre Jeunet.

Jeunet, of course, is best-known for the international smash *Amelie*, the romantic extravaganza that everyone I know loves. (I hated

*Amelie*

. Every precious, overstaged, "magical" moment of it.) But if you've seen Jeunet's

*Delicatessen*

or

*City of Lost Children*

or

*Alien Resurrection*

, you know that the man has a gift for mixing the comedic and the perverse, and his imagery is creepily suggestive; his aggressive staging can be off-putting – I, personally, found it insanely

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oppressive in

*Amelie*

– but given the right context, it can also prove hypnotic. In

*A Very Long Engagement*

, currently playing at the Brew & View, the production design is incredibly rich – with special praise reserved for Bruno Delbonnel's exquisite cinematography and Angelo Badalamenti's glorious score – but it's Jean-Pierre Jeunet's imagination and inspiration that keep you riveted.

Beginning in France of 1917 and continuing through the immediate years after the Great War ended, *A Very Long Engagement* is, at its core, a romantic war epic with a Nancy Drew twist, but it covers so many genres that it's practically unclassifiable. After a prologue that establishes the film's unflinching (i.e., gory) eye for the horrors of battle, we are introduced to our heroine, Mathilde (Audrey Tautou), a 20-year-old whose fiancé, Manech (Gaspard Ulliel), was thought to have perished in battle. (The magnitude of their romance is detailed through a series of golden-hued flashbacks.) Mathilde soon learns that her intended might still be alive, and goes about searching for him, traveling across Europe, rummaging through files, and interviewing those who might have information about his whereabouts.

Jeunet stages Mathilde's ongoing investigation with the playful air of an Agatha Christie mystery, yet in a subplot involving a mysterious assassin whose path crosses with Mathilde's too often for comfort, Jeunet turns *Engagement* into a particular nasty thriller, too; there's a scenario involving a man tied to a bed, a gun, and a mirrored ceiling that might constitute 2004's most sickily entertaining cringe-and-giggle sequence. (This clever killer is who Jennifer Garner's Elektra *should* have been.) The starkness and viscera of the movie's battle sequences (also shown in flashback) are viciously effective, and all throughout the film, Jeunet throws in bizarre moments of visual comedy to lighten the load, such as his introduction of one of Manech's service allies – in his new profession as a bartender, he can crack walnuts with the wood-and-metal hand that replaces the one he lost in battle. (That amusing sick joke is the Jeunet touch.)

*A Very Long Engagement* is a big, thrilling movie, grand and technically astonishing, and it deserves to be seen. But the film doesn't leave a lot of room for its human beings. Even Mathilde's and Manech's relationship, which is the heart of the entire movie, feels more like a conceit – an excuse to get the plot in motion – than it does a romance. Lord knows Audrey Tautou can do the pitiable-waif-who-suffers-in-silence thing with the best of them, but she isn't given much else to play here; the script, by Jeunet and Guillaume Laurant, is tricky in its gradual revealing of information and it's rather beautifully constructed, yet Jeunet and Laurant, in their adaptation of Sebastien Japrisot's novel, don't seem all that interested in

*people*

. It's not until halfway through the film, when, of all things, an American star shows up, that you

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get an indication of how marvelous

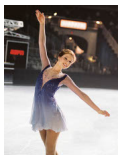
*A Very Long Engagement*

*could*

have been. One of Mathilde's interviews is with the wife of one of Manech's allies, and when this Frenchwoman makes her first appearance, the audience nearly gasps. "Oh my God," you hear people murmuring, "that's Jodie Foster!" In her subplot, Foster – speaking French with a fluency that would make Meryl Streep salivate – plays a married woman who finds true love in the arms of another man, and Foster's performance is so marvelously nuanced and heartbreaking that it shifts the entire movie into a whole new emotional plane. (It also makes you long for Jodie Foster in more leading roles.) Foster's role in the film probably takes up more screen time that it merits, but you sense that Jeunet was so beguiled by the depth of emotion Foster was bringing to her role that he didn't dare shave her scenes. Had Jeunet infused his leading lovers with the same degree of passion,

*A Very Long Engagement*

might have been truly extraordinary. We'll have to settle for it being very, very good.



### **ICE PRINCESS**

Normally, you'd have to drag me kicking and screaming into a live-action, G-rated Disney flick called *Ice Princess*. But I wound up at a screening of it anyway – I could hardly call myself a Joan Cusack fan if I missed the one time in her Hollywood career when she's actually the top-billed performer – and easily lived to tell about it. For its target audience,

*Ice Princess*

is harmless fun, I guess. Granted, the movie is most definitely Not for Me; it's one of those uplifting, follow-your-dream movies with a kiddie-friendly

*You-go-girl!*

edge that generally makes my teeth ache, and even the young girls in its audience might follow the story and correctly realize that they've seen it all before. But the movie features several unexpected pleasures: Kim Cattrall gives a quick-witted performance as a flinty skating coach, Michelle Trachtenberg has some of the gawky charm of late-'90s Scarlett Johansson, and

*Ice Princess*

has the sense to make intellectual curiosity – Trachtenberg's skater is also a prodigy in physics – seem engaging; it doesn't punish its heroine for her brains.

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At least, it doesn't at first. But in an angle that made me feel about a million years old, our spunky teen eventually finds herself forced to choose between a Harvard scholarship and a potential career as a professional skater, and I wanted to scream, "Take the scholarship, you little dip!" The film, needless to say, is on the side of professional skating and romance with Trachtenberg's Zamboni-driving teen hunk, but I thought it was a little irresponsible of the movie to make intelligence look like a mere *stage* in adolescent life, and not exactly fair to make Cusack, who plays Well-Meaning Mom, a snippy, snobby priss who spouts annoying feminist trivia and rails against ice dancers' wardrobes; despite the eccentricity that Cusack, as always, brings to her line readings, her character is a pain. In the end,

*Ice Princess*

tells us that an education is all well and good, but Having a Dream is better. What the film's demographic of eight- to 16-year-old girls will take from the film is apparent enough. What their parents might take from it is another matter entirely.