

Little Thief lacks lustre

The Little Thief (La Petite Voleuse)
Princess Theatre
December 8-14

review by Chris Helmers

In the face of seemingly high critical acclaim, I must say that I find this posthumous Francois Truffaut piece boring. Did it fail in the hands of producer Claude Berri and director Claude Miller, or was it just my jaded sensibilities?

It seems that when Truffaut was working on his famous debut film, *The 400 Blows*, he had intended to parallel the main male character with a female character. As it turned out, the male character became so full that he left out the female character entirely but was plagued until his death by a compulsion to create a film embodying this character.

Thus, the character "Janine" grew over the thirty years of Truffaut's movie making career until, virtually on his death bed, he passed the dream on to producer Claude Berri along with scant character and story line notes and "provision" for the film to be produced after his death. Berri took the challenge from the dying master giving the screenplay writing and film direction to Claude Miller, a Truffaut disciple.

Out of these efforts came *The Little Thief*, which is actually a story about Truffaut's misguided youth in the guise of events from the life of 16 year old Janine Castang (Charlotte Gainsbourg) in 1950. Like Janine, Truffaut was a post-war teen, had dropped out of school, was fascinated with film, spent a lot of time in cinemas and ended up in a reformatory as a result of petty thievery.

In that I experienced no highlights in the film, I would err grossly in robbing you of any and all enjoyment from this film by exposing further details of the plot. Suffice it to say that the film drones on and on delineating how Janine's petty thievery keeps her from rising above her "loser" life.

Yet, the film's failure can in no way be blamed on the acting. Gainsbourg displays natural ability in portraying the often shy yet rebellious Janine. Unfortunately, she has too much character to be believable in the role of society's victim. Simone de la Brosse as Raoul, Janine's boyfriend, superlatively portrays the teenage loser who brags of being great but hasn't got the character to be anything but a petty thief. He does get stuck in an outrageously bad scene which is supposed to be a clip from a cinema newsreel. It is done so poorly that you have to laugh, but I'm sure Truffaut turns in his grave each time the scene is projected.

No, the problem with the movie arises from the plot itself. The story slips from situation to situation without developing any one to the degree that it could create interest in the viewer. The movie ambles through the events of Janine's life as if something other than those events is the real focus of the film. One critic says the film projects Truffaut's "unsentimental depiction of children and young people" ... I suggest that the word "boring" should be used in place of "unsentimental." Again, this may be due to Miller's writing and direction and not to Truffaut's original concept.

W. P. Kinsella, one of Canada's indomitable authors, in an *Edmonton Journal* interview.



Charlotte Gainsbourg as Janine Casting gets into some hot water with the cops in *The Little Thief*, directed by Claude Miller.

disagreed with critics who believe that a writer's (could we extend that to "artist's"?) work should reflect his personal experiences. He said that he had always wanted to write a

story about his life: "... but of course when I went to do it, I found that nothing interesting had ever happened to me. [So] I've had to invent all the happenings." Perhaps either

Truffaut or Miller should have taken this tack with *The Little Thief*, in order to come up with something more interesting or even entertaining.

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