

## Document Citation

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# 'Mermaid' improbable but fun

By JOHN HARTL

Francois Truffaut can treat the most serious subjects in the lightest, most ingratiating way. Often it is only after watching his effervescent, always entertaining films that one recognizes underlying currents of harshness and melancholy.

The title of "Mississippi Mermaid," at the Ridgemont Theater, suggests frivolity, and the first section of the film does not contradict that suggestion. Even the first hints that Truffaut is really dealing with a story about murder, betrayal and a complex kind of love can be brushed aside — for awhile.

The movie is about a passion that knows no bounds, a love that really is blind and eventually appears to be rewarded for its blindness. Yet Truffaut's style is cool, detached, slightly bemused. Even at the end we are not quite sure how we feel about these lovers and their particular ways of showing feeling.

On the surface, the story seems a bit silly, mixing mystery, coincidence, romance and a plot twist similar to the one in Alfred Hitchcock's "Vertigo."

Jean-Paul Belmondo plays a wealthy heir to a cigarette factory which seems to be the main industry of an island off the coast of Africa. He is awaiting the arrival of his bride on a steamship called Mississippi Mermaid.

The bride happens to be a girl he has never met. He found her through a newspaper advertisement, has written to her several times and has her picture, but that's all he knows.

When she turns up in the person of Catherine Deneuve, who does not look like the girl in the picture and whose habits do not always conform to those of the girl in the letters, he marries her anyway.

Soon after, she runs away with his fortune and he follows her. When he finds her, he cannot go through with the plan to kill her, and he eventually even kills for her, making both of them outlaws. The bond between them is still shaky at the fade-out, but it seems to be based in a relationship that, in a crazy way, really works.

There are all sorts of loopholes in story, characterization and motivation, and much of the dialog is pretty banal, yet the film also works in its crazy way.

Finally, it doesn't matter that Belmondo seems too personable to have to advertise for a wife, that he catches up with Miss Deneuve through a most unlikely television broadcast, that the man he murders is found so

quickly after the crime, or that we never know enough about Miss Deneuve to know whether or not she's lying all the time.

Truffaut convinces us that the world of this movie does exist, even though its connections with the real world are often tenuous. Perhaps he's saying that it's a world that only passion could imagine or tolerate — or survive.