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WORK OUT: A dozen actors tell the story of "Workers, Farmers" in pic helmed by Danielle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub.

## WORKERS, FARMERS

(OPERA!, CONTADINI)

(ITALY-FRANCE)

A Pierre Grise Distribution release (in France) of a Danielle Huillet-Jean-Marie Straub production/Pierre Grise Prods. co-production. (International sales: Pierre Grise, Paris.) Produced by Huillet, Straub, Maurice Tinchant, Martine Marignac.

Directed by Danielle Huillet, Jean-Marie Straub. Screenplay, Straub, based on the novel by Elio Vittorini. Camera (color), Renato Berto, Jean-Paul Toraille, Marion Befe; editors, Huillet, Straub; sound (Dolby SR), Jean-Pierre Duret, Dimitri Haulet. **Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (Directors Fortnight)**, May 14, 2001. Running time: 123 MIN.

With: Angela Nuyara, Giacinto di Pascoli, Giampaolo Cassarino, Enrico Achilli, Angela Durantini, Martina Gionfriddo, Andrea Balducci, Gabriella Taddai, Vittorio Vigneri, Aldo Fruttuosi, Rosalba Curatola, Enrico Pelosini.

By DEBORAH YOUNG

**T**he impenetrability of European indie directors Danielle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, who have for almost 40 years carved out their niche in film history with seminal experimental films like "The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach," seemed to have lifted, a little, in their 1998 "Sicilia." Based on a book by the writer Elio Vittorini, it illuminated a piece of Italian post-war history through images and dialogue. In "Workers, Farmers," alas, obscurity settles in again. Perhaps shocked by the number of people who enjoyed "Sicilia" (extremely small in any case), the duo has taken another text by Vittorini and filmed actors standing around in a woods reading it. Massive walkouts at the Cannes screening portend dribbles of ticket-buyers for the Pierre Grise release at selected Parisian locations.

For more than two hours, a dozen actors in half-hearted post-war costume either stare into the camera and recite, or lower their eyes and recite, or read from a script. A reader of Vittorini would at least have the benefit of a book jacket and preface to put the words in context. The audience does not.

The characters are part of a utopian post-war collective of workers and farmers who went off to live in the countryside amid great hardship. Pic throws comprehension to the winds, however, and viewers could be misled into thinking the action took place during the war, or in some kind of prison camp.

The whole operation could have been more profitably carried out as an audio book, with liner notes to make the dialogue meaningful.

## EMIL AND THE DETECTIVES

(EMIL UND DIE DETEKTIVE)

(GERMANY)

A Bavaria Film-Und Produktions presentation of a Lunaris Film production, in co-production with ZDF. (International sales: Bavaria Film Intl., Munich.) Produced by Peter Zenk, Uschi Reich. Co-producers, Christoph Holch, Susanne Van Lessen.

Directed, written by Franziska Buch, based on the book by Erich Kastner. Camera (color), Hannes Hubach; editor, Patricia Rommel; music, Biber Gullatz, Eckes Malz; production designer, Albrecht Konrad; costume designer, Eveline Stosser; sound (Dolby digital), Manfred Banach, Michael Kranz; children casting, Jacqueline Reitz. **Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (market)**, May 12, 2001. Running time: 110 MIN.

With: Tobias Retzlaff, Anja Sommer, Jurgen Vogel, Maria Schrader, Kai Wiesinger, Maximilian Befort, David Klock, Tim Hansen, Maurice Kumar, Sergej Moya, Anita Schulz, Anna Schulz, Tobias Unkauf, Thando Walbaum, Rudolf Kowalski, Martin Feifel, Oscar Ortega Sanchez, Gruschenka Stevens, Horst Kottelba, Rufus Beck, Florian Lukas.

By DAVID STRATTON

**E**rich Kastner's much-filmed 1928 children's classic, "Emil and the Detectives," comes up fresh as a daisy in this ebullient modernization of the story about a bunch of kids who track down a thief in the crowded streets of Berlin. This robustly staged family film should attract audiences in countries where the book is well known, and have plenty of ancillary life down the track.

Kastner's tome, which also inspired the 1946 Ealing comedy "Hue and Cry," has been updated to the era of skateboards, roller skates and cell phones, but the plot is much the same. Emil (Tobias Retzlaff) is a 12-year-old who lives with his father in a small town in eastern Germany; his mother left a couple of years earlier and lives in Canada with her new man.

Dad has just managed to snag a job as a salesman; however, he crashes his car while hurrying to collect Emil from school, winds up in the hospital and loses his driver's license for three months.

While his father is recovering, Emil's teacher sends the boy by train to Berlin to stay with the teacher's sister, a minister and herself a single mother. But during the journey, Emil makes the mistake of talking to a stranger (Jurgen Vogel) about the possibility of obtaining an illegal license for his Dad; as a result, he is drugged and robbed of his money.

When the train pulls in to Berlin's Zoo station, Emil, who has never been in the city before, succeeds in trailing the thief to a cafe, where he meets Pony, a girl who has the street smarts, and the contacts among children of all backgrounds, to muster a formidable force of detectives to foil the bad guy.

Rest of the film involves a great deal of good old-fashioned adventure, suspense and comedy, as the kinder track the thief down. Meanwhile, Gypsy, whose parents have so many kids they won't notice he's gone missing, is ordered to take Emil's place and stay at the home of the minister, where he wreaks a fair amount of havoc.

Adapter-director Franziska Buch sets the tone with elan, directing a cast of enthusiastic youngsters with pace and a fine feel for Berlin locations. Snappy music, bright camerawork and an engaging cast succeed in breathing new life into a well-loved yarn.

## GET A LIFE

(GANHAR A VIDA)

(PORTUGAL-FRANCE)

A Madragoa Filmes/Gemini Films co-production. (International sales: Gemini Films, Paris.) Produced by Paulo Branco.

Directed by Joao Canijo. Screenplay, Canijo, Celine Pouillon, based on a story by Pierre Hodgson. Camera (color), Mario Castanheira; editor, Joao Braz; music, Alexandre Soares; production designer, Mathieu Menut; costume designer, Anne Dunsford-Varenne; sound (Dolby SR), Philippe Morel. **Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (Un Certain Regard)**, May 14, 2001. Running time: 115 MIN.

Cidalia ..... Rita Blanco  
Adelino ..... Adriano Luz  
Celestina ..... Teresa Madruga  
Alda ..... Alda Gomes  
Orlando ..... Olivier Leite  
Aderito ..... Luis Rego

By DEBORAH YOUNG

**A** quiet film that slowly takes hold as its central character, a Portuguese cleaning woman residing in France, assumes the proportions of a heroine of Greek tragedy, "Get a Life" is one of stage and film helmer Joao Canijo's ("Three Less Me") most rounded works for cinema. The English title is misleadingly facetious for this somber drama, filmed in the barely lit, unreal colors of modern Portuguese cinema, about a woman who loses her son. It will take a discerning distrib to find the right niche for it, targeting the most sophisticated arthouse audiences.

Action is set outside Paris in a housing project populated by the Portuguese working class. Depicted as conservative Catholics, they are not unlike some Italo-American communities. The world of Cidalia (Rita Blanco)



LIFER: Joao Canijo's "Get a Life" tells the story of a Portuguese cleaning woman in France.



TALKSHOW: Caroline Ducey and Lou Doillon talk it over in "Totally Flaky," shown in Un Certain Regard at Cannes.

co) revolves around her husband, sons and sister and her job.

Refusing viewers the convenience of dialogue in its opening scenes, pic lets audiences grab what meaning they may from the unsteady handheld camerawork and swiftly intercut scenes. A teenager is killed in a shootout, but only much later is it clear that he was Cidalia's son.

Internalizing her grief, she decides to picket the police station with a petition to learn the truth about his death. All they can tell her is that it wasn't a police bullet that killed him.

Her struggle to break the law of silence and bring change to the community makes her a kind of latter-day Antigone. The attention that she draws to herself begins to make the old-time immigrants uneasy. Her friends begin to avoid her, the men put pressure on her husband, someone firebombs their apartment.

Though subtle, the film is admirable in knocking down stereotypes. Cidalia is a cleaning woman that Ken Loach never dreamed of, because her identity never depends on what she does for a living. Her debt-ridden husband (Adriano Luz) never stops loving her. But, ironically, the young hoodlums who peddle drugs are the ones who understand her best.

With her tragic, unmistakably Portuguese face, her unpredictable behavior and sudden bursts of sensuality, Blanco creates a complex portrait of a wounded woman. Her sister Celestina (Teresa Madruga) accuses her of caring for no one but herself but the film is on Cidalia's side.

Pic is strongly characterized by Mario Castanheira's underlit, close-up nighttime cinematography, Joao Braz's cutting, which presents the characters in glancing, offhand bits and pieces, and Alexandre Soares' confident score.

## TOTALLY FLAKY

(CARREMENT A L'OUEST)

(FRANCE)

A Les Films du Losange release of a DIBA Films production, in association with France 3 Cinema, with participation of Canal Plus. (International sales: Les Films du Losange, Paris.) Produced by Richard Djoudi. Executive producer, Muriel Robine.

Directed, written by Jacques Doillon. Camera (color), Caroline Champetier; editor, Catherine Quesemond; costume designer, Mic Cheminal; sound (Dolby), FredERIC Ullman, Dominique Hennequin; assistant directors, Lola Doillon, Emmanuelle Gaborit. **Reviewed at Planet Hollywood screening room, Paris, April 24, 2001. (In Cannes Film Festival — Un Certain Regard.)** Running time: 99 MIN.

Fred ..... Lou Doillon  
Sylvia ..... Caroline Ducey  
Alex ..... Guillaume Saurel  
Francois ..... Camille Clavel  
With: Xavier Villeneuve, Hafed Benotman, Joshua Phillips, Antoine Chain.

By LISA NESSELSON

**T**he coltish young girlfriend of a college boy takes a perverse shine to his charmingly thug-gish drug dealer in Jacques Doillon's "Totally Flaky," a mile-a-minute sampler of contempo speech patterns and slang uttered by three energetic leads. As hermetic exercises go, this chipper, rather than sleazy, pic — lensed largely in a hotel suite by night — is a bang-up job. But while critics may enjoy the impressively fluid lensing and acting, it's difficult to imagine many customers paying for these much-ado-about-nothing shenanigans. Given director's name, fests may bite.

Francois (Camille Clavel), the b.f. of Fred (Lou Doillon, helmer's daughter with Jane Birkin), owes money to Alex (live-wire newcomer Guillaume Saurel). When Alex gives Francois a beating, Fred unaccountably falls for him. Both parties are out of their league as Fred encourages Alex to pick up moody Sylvia (Caroline Ducey, from "Romance") in a club. The three repair to a pricey hotel suite where the talk never stops as Fred perversely tries to throw Alex and Sylvia together, with mixed results.

The idea is to update the so-called "marivaudage" (slyly crafted theatrical banter and intricate machinations) of Marivaux's plays to the rat-a-tat-tat slang and lazy courtship rituals of today's youth. But in a world in which women can fend for themselves and only feelings — rather than eternal societal reprobation — are at stake, this bouncy experiment falls flat.