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Carmen: What a Fine Romance This Isn't

First Name: Carmen

★ ★ ★

FIRST NAME: CARMEN

Directed and written by Jean-Luc Godard
With Maruschka Detmers, Jacques Bonnaffe, and Jean-Luc Godard

By Blake Lucas

Happily, cinema has once again become the name of the game for Jean-Luc Godard. For those who still doubted this after *Every Man for Himself* (1980) and *Passion* (1982), the director's fluent modern variation on Prosper Merimee's classical theme eloquently confirms that the lengthy, tortur ous "political phase" of his career is over. *First Name: Carmen* is enjoying considerable popularity, largely because it is perceived to be more like his sixties films than any of his recent works. Although this is only superficially true, the film's surface is engaging enough to allay fears that Godard still wants to be the forbidding, alienating anti-artist who dismayed us during the seventies.

Of course, many embraced the political works that stole his artistic passion in the wake of the social upheavals of May 1968 and after the sour scorn shown in 1967's *Weekend* for the bourgeois medium of which he had already become an ambivalent master. Speaking as one who for years considered the director of *Pierrot Le Fou* (1965) to be the guiding light of cinema, I can honestly say that no devotion ever led me into more excruciating hours of suffering than my devotion to the films of Godard. The most numbing moments were provoked by a tract called *A Movie Like Any Other* (1968) that might more appropriately have been entitled *A Movie More Boring Than Any Other.*

No question about it, then: It is tonic to be afforded pleasure by a Godard film once more. But we should be careful not to mistake the nature of this pleasure or confuse ourselves about what Godard has to offer that makes him such a compelling artistic figure. For one thing, Godard has not backtracked to even the vague respect for classical narrative form that was one element of his earlier films. The fact that *First Name: Carmen* has a story reminiscent of those in earlier films, and that the story is easy to comprehend despite the usual Godardian digressions and fragmentation, does not mean that it is meant to engage our emotions on any deep level. Further, the apparent presence of ideas (of a philosophical/social/sexual/aesthetic nature) should not be taken too seriously; one lesson of the political films cut deep and cannot be ignored: Godard, despite his intellectualism, is not a penetrating or even sensible thinker on most subjects, and it should be retrospectively apparent (if it was not at the time) that he was barely less naive in the articulation of nonpolitical ideas during his classical years.

Not that Godard isn't intelligent, but his thought processes—necessarily expressed through subjects that derive at least in part from his ill-disguised emotional limitations—tend to stumble over his sensibility even as his considerable writing gifts disguise them. A pleasing, even characteristically beautiful use of language comes easily to him and therein lies a key to the positive nature of his cinema, which will continually frustrate those who would have it be more mainstream, conservative, sober, or whatever. Godard's gifts are form and style, which he uses to analyze how cinematic language creates emotional and aesthetic responses. In this sense, Godard is more of an essayist than a storyteller, an essayist who reigns supreme over a single province of thought, the relationship of cinema to the spectator.

The proof of this is apparent in *First Name: Carmen* from any angle we choose to view it. If we consider the narrative line, for example, we find that Godard has retreated—beneath the cover of impeccable source material—to a subject he treated a number of times in his earlier films: Man led to ruin by Woman. And in the context of those films, not to mention the work of other artists (Merimee himself, for example, or Otto Preminger, whose 1954 *Carmen Jones* is as stylized as Godard and a far more dramatically penetrating modern recreation of the Carmen story in cinematic terms), the vacuity of Godard's contemporary revamping of the story becomes obvious. Godard's excuse for *Carmen* as source (stated by the director himself in his role—as an amusing, scruffily romantic version *of* himself—in the movie) is that "the classics always work." He is right about this, of course (and the five Beethoven quartets he integrates so beautifully into the film's overall structure prove it), but the real lure of *Carmen* is how it fits so well the specific misogyny that has always stimulated Godard's creativity. Godard's misogyny—which emphasizes distrust of women rather than overt hatred—is too plainly aligned to a simple perception of Woman as Other to be treated dispassionately. As with certain artists of a similar sensibility, this emotionally stifling perspective can also lead Godard to celebrate woman as the sublime vehicle for a projection of his own romantic ideals, as in the Anna Karina films *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962) and *Alphaville* (1965).

Godard never went further with the idea of the "bad woman" than he did with the heroine of his first film, *Breathless* (1959), and Jean Seberg's Patricia Leacock remains one of the most interesting women in the modern cinema. Her betrayal of the hero can only partly be traced to reasonable impulses; the key to her character is that she resolutely denies the antiromanticism of her feelings throughout the film, yet glacially turns away from the dead hero (Jean-Paul Belmondo) who embodies all of the director's romanticism and has therefore been betrayed on the deepest emotional level. Godard thereafter worked sophisticated variations on the psychological/emotional prototype of the relationship (as in *Pierrot Le Fou*), and his only mature view of a male/female rela-

tionship (in 1963's *Contempt*) confirms the pattern while subjecting it to some profound observations.

By contrast, *First Name: Carmen* offers nothing more than the spectacle of a rather vapid man, Joseph (Jacques Bonnaffe), responding to erotic attraction during a bank robbery (a sequence obliquely well-staged and shot in Godard's inimitable, charming style) that sees him fleeing with an attractive young criminal (Maruschka Detmers) to a Trouville apartment belonging to her uncle (the aforementioned Godard who, as a washed-up film director, bides his time at a chic hospital while waiting for a comeback). While there Bonnaffe engages in a largely joyless affair with her while she plots a hotel robbery that will be carried out with her uncle's film making as a cover.

Detmers gets more of Godard's attention than Bonnaffe; the director lingers by turns on her face and naked body, inadvertently exposing an appealing and mysterious eroticism in the face while gradually turning the lovely body into a cold fact. Even though Bonnaffe can dispiritedly quip, "Now I know why they call prison the hole," as he stares dumbly at Detmers's genitals after they have had sex, no characters of any dimension emerge and the story has not (and will not) possess enough individual dynamism and personality to impart any serious inflection into the moment. This is simply one more despairing Godardian observation on the tragedy of sexual enslavement (I liked better Belmondo's statement to Seberg in *Breathless* when queried as to why he only wants to make love to her: "It doesn't click with anyone else." Godard's attempts to balance his unveiled pessimism concerning women's tragic hold on the abused romantic male are half-hearted.

Keys to the movie's success as an integrated aesthetic experience can more fruitfully be found in characters almost peripheral to the main action. Claire (Myriam Roussel), who briefly steps into the role of the traditional "nice girl" to question Joseph about the extent of his feelings for Carmen, is also a substitute second violinist in the string quartet seen rehearsing throughout the film (and ultimately performing in the hotel lobby during the climax, to assure that every thread has a place somewhere). As the vehicle of more delicate, spiritual feelings than Carmen, she links the film's sensual and aesthetic worlds (being just as lovely as the heroine), but she is not permitted to dim the lustre of the intense self-awareness that accompanies the more purely erotic Carmen's well-observed expression of sexual melancholia. Godard's hilarious performance as himself, though, is the most entertaining feature of the film. Relaxed, self-conscious, but never more than half-serious in his low-key posturings, Godard almost seems to be acknowledging his own limitations and suggests that pretension is the last thing likely to work in his artistic favor.

Fortunately, Godard as director proves that, for all the thinness in this recreation of a basic male-female myth, he is still an evolving artist who continues to know better than almost any of his contemporaries how to bring real beauty to his chosen medium. For example, Godard's earlier color films were composed almost entirely in primary colors, while this one explores the subtle warmth of black and yellow contrasts, of gray waves, of lush skin against an opaque background. And Godard's interest in image/sound counterpoint, always a feature of his work, roams into new areas of subtle emotional effect. He allows the quartet's playing to overlap other scenes and punctuate dramatically vital moments. A one point he stops the flow of dialogue during an intimate scene so that Carmen's speech during a close-up becomes mute gesture, mysterious and poetic, full of nuances her words alone could not evoke.

How many films of a more traditional nature than Godard's actually provide any deep, provocative, or memorable insights into life or relationships? By keeping to his own road, even when a path seems so weird and nonsensical as to provoke ridicule, Godard easily and generously creates a flow of image and sound that induce poetic resonances completely transcending the apparent poverty of his characters, narrative, and ideas. For example, the precious search for the word "dawn" in the tragically violent conclusion of *First Name: Carmen* may not sound like much of a grace note, but when Godard repeats some of the film's images for the final time and juxtaposes them to the last movement of Beethoven's final quartet and close-ups of the finally impenetrable femme fatale, his fluent manipulation of the sequence's purely cinematic elements sets up reverberations that totally transform the banal content, infusing it with haunting echoes of a mournful, previously suppressed romanticism.

FILM RATINGS

★ ★ ★ ★ — Inspired
★ ★ ★ — A Must-See
★ ★ — Noteworthy
★ — Minor Virtues
∘ — A Wipe-Out