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## Second Time Around

### "Walk on the Wild Side: Olivier Assayas"

*Irma Vep*, one of the best films of 1997, may have seemed like it came out of nowhere, so ripe it was with energy, intoxicating ambiguity, and loose-limbed notions about character and story. In fact, director Olivier Assayas is a veteran of five other features. Why he's not a well-established name by now, at least in the art-house world, is one of the great mysteries of foreign-film distribution. Works like *A New Life* (showing Saturday at the PFA) and *Paris at Dawn* (Friday) are some of the sharpest films to come out of France since the heyday of New Wave, and *Cold Water* (also on Saturday), a 1994 work that to my knowledge has never been screened in the Bay Area, is simply one of the great films of the '90s, a work of astonishing grace and power.

The film's centerpiece is a flabbergasting all-night revel in a deserted, rural chateau. If there were a Nobel Prize for party scenes, this would be a shoo-in. It's 1972. The film's 16-year-old protagonists are Christine, an escapee from a



#### *A New Life.*

mental institution, and Gilles, who's helping hide her from her parents. From dusk to dawn, Assayas follows his characters and rides the party's ebb and flow like a surfer rides

the ocean waves. His regular cinematographer, Denis Lenoir, stays close to the details. (Assayas is very stingy with establishing shots, saving them for occasional punctuation.) We trail a hash-filled chillum as it passes among a silently grooving group of stoners; track Gilles and Christine as they make out to Leonard Cohen's "Avalanche"; watch while, at the party's ecstatic apex, dozens of kids dance with glorious, parentless abandon around a towering bonfire as some unseen kid at the stereo rips the needle from that doomy Cohen song and plays Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Up Around the Bend" over and over; and, finally, slip away as a cold, bleary, up-all-night sun rises, to the tune of the perfect end-of-the-party diva, Nico. The scene lasts half an hour, and in it Assayas catches the full arc of confused, communal adolescence in all its rapture and melancholy. When it's over, you'll be begging the PFA's projectionist to rewind and run it again.

— **Tod Booth**

*"Walk on the Wild Side: Olivier Assayas" concludes at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley Friday and Saturday, Feb. 6 and 7. See Repts Etc., Page 72, for a complete schedule.*