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# La Femme d'a Cote
## (The Woman Next Door)
## (FRENCH-COLOR)

Paris, Sept. 15.

Gaumont release of a Films du Carrosse/TF1 Films Production coproduction. Stars Gerard Depardieu and Fanny Ardant. Directed by Francois Truffaut. Screenplay, Truffaut, Suzanne Schiffman and Jean Aurel; camera (Fujicolor), William Lubtchansky; Jean-Pierre Kohut-Svelko; sound, Michel Laurent; costumes, Michele Cerf; editor, Martine Barraque; music, Georges Delerue. Reviewed at Ponthieu screening room, Paris, Sept. 14, 1981. Running time: **106 MINS.**

Bernard Coudray ..... Gerard Depardieu
Mathilde Bauchard ..... Fanny Ardant
Philippe Bauchard ..... Henri Garcin
Arlette Coudray ...Michele Baumgartner
Madame Jouve .....Veronique Silver
Doctor ..... Philippe Morier-Genoud

True to his manner of alternating somber subjects with more high-spirited pictures, Francois Truffaut has followed up "The Last Metro" — the commercial peak of his career to date — with a downbeat contemporary love story. It's a good bet "The Woman Next Door" will not come close to mobilizing the critical and boxoffice approbation of his previous work.

Truffaut watchers who found that the director was somewhat out of his element with "Metro," both in style and theme will have much to rejoice about here. He's recovered that limpid narrative ease, which he somewhat abdicated in "Metro," for a more classical directing manner; and he's treating a subject that is right up his auteur alley: obsessive passion and pathological feminine psychology.

"The Woman Next Door," written by Truffaut, his long-standing collaborator Suzanne Schiffman and Jean Aurel, tells of a man and a woman, played by Gerard Depardieu and screen newcomer Fanny Ardant, who had a traumatic love affair, separated and met again several years later.

When the film opens, Depardieu is living a tranquil middle-class existence with his wife and child in a suburb of Grenoble. The house next door, long vacant, is let out to another couple — the wife turns out to be Ardant. Depardieu feels his emotional equilibrium threatened and tries to sabotage any neighborly sentiment.

But their meeting is inevitable. Soon old passions are rekindled and the two become lovers again, meeting afternoons at a hotel where they reenact their scarcely unchanged scenario of love-hate. Ardant tries to break off, but Depardieu provokes a violent scene in public at a garden party in a local tennis club.

With their respective mates now aware of their relation and striving to keep them apart, the tables are turned. They begin to meet again, but it is now Depardieu who breaks off, driving Ardant to a nervous depression. She is hospitalized, when she is released, her husband finds an apartment elsewhere and they move. But Ardant returns to the house one night and Depardieu instinctively goes out to meet her. After they make love, Ardant slips a gun from her bag, shoots her lover and then kills herself.

Fellow New Wave surfer Claude Chabrol once remarked that Truffaut was now making the kind of pictures he used to attack as a critic in the 1950's. It's sort of true, though it's not especially a reproach, since among the young Truffaut's filmic bugbears were fine directors like Rene Clement and Claude Autant-Lara.

"Woman Next Door" resembles those Old School movies in the way it meticulously marks out the contours of plot and characterization. It's dramatically quite effective, though there's little here that takes us by surprise. Truffaut points out his itinerary early in the film, and all we have to do is sit back and wait for the last stop.

The script's most blatant and weakest dramatic convention is the use of a "raisonneur-confidente" in the form of the woman who runs the sports club, where several key scenes are set. She has suffered a similar morbid passion in her youth and has survived a suicide attempt, which has left her crippled. But, like Edith Piaf, she regrets nothing. Only Veronique Silver's fine spirited performance saves the part from being insufferably demonstrative.

Depardieu and Ardant, who is well known to tv audiences here, provide all the right emotional convolutions to the tortured lovers. Michele Baumgartner and Henri Garcin, as their legal mates, are adequate.

Truffaut doesn't have lenser Nestor Almendros on this one, but gets admirable images from William Lubtchansky and impeccable contributions from his other regular collaborators: editor Martine Barraque, production designer Jean-Pierre Kohut-Svelko and composer Georges Delerue.

The direction is rigorous, but only in one scene does the old Truffaut imagination get into top gear. He has the guts to use a dramatic cliche like the fateful telegram — telling Silver that her one-time flame is coming to see her. In a long-shot we see the messenger arrive at the club grounds and zig-zag among the guests in search of the addressee. It's a splendid image of twisted workings of fate. —*Len.*