

Document Citation

Title	Angèle
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Source	<i>Boston Phoenix</i>
Date	1988 Feb 05
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	9, 16
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Angèle, Pagnol, Marcel, 1934

ANGÈLE

BOSTON PHOENIX
FEB. 5, 1988

There are those rare pastoral films that are touched with greatness — Griffith's *Way Down East*, Renoir's *Toni* and *A Day in the Country*, Marcel Pagnol's *Harvest*. Most, though, are weighed down by their virtuousness and their simplified morality. In the 1934 *Angèle*, you can spot the Pagnol who wrote the saga from which Claude Berri derived *Jean de Florette* and *Manon of the Spring*; though less inflated and less murderously respectful, *Angèle* is cut from the same dull stock. Orane Demazis (the Fanny of Pagnol's *Marius-Fanny-César* trilogy) plays a farmer's daughter who falls for a city slicker's banter and ends up prostituting for him in Marseilles. Her father's loyal farm hand (Fernandel) rescues her and brings her home, but the obstinate old man (Henri Poupon), who has grown half-mad with anger and grief in her absence, locks her and her bastard child in the cellar and closes his farm to visitors, refusing to admit the family's shame to the world. There she languishes, until the sad-eyed peasant (Jean Servais) who has loved her from afar risks her father's wrath to serenade her with his harmonica.

Pagnol's films could occasionally transcend his limitations as a director; *Harvest* is deeply affecting, and the Coolidge Corner Moviehouse is screening his most celebrated picture, *The Baker's Wife*, on the same bill as *Angèle*. (All three of these movies are based on the fiction of Pagnol's fellow Provençal, Jean Giono.) In a movie like *Angèle*, where there are too few lyrical passages to lift the material above the level of melodrama, and where even that great comic ape Fernandel, with his 10-ton eyelids and enormous horse jaw and battered face, gives an undistinguished performance as the faithful Saturnin, you can't help focusing on the clumsiness of the direction. Pagnol, really a playwright by trade, had a fairly primitive camera style; he was very fond of close-ups, but often he made poor choices (and he framed his shots awkwardly). For example, in the scene where Saturnin discovers *Angèle* in a Marseilles whorehouse after she's been gone for two years, Pagnol keeps the camera trained on him, though since he doesn't yet realize what her life has turned into, it's her reaction we care about. And at his worst, Pagnol had a deadly sense of pace. (*César*, the only one of the trilogy he directed himself, is as slow and clunky as *Angèle*.) Moreover, as a screenwriter he had a weakness for stagy talk (you watch *Angèle*'s story being played out and then hear it all over again when it's explained to a young suitor), and for stolid three-act structures. You can feel the curtain tumbling to the ground after *Angèle* has left the farm and again after Saturnin leads her away from the sinful city.

In this case, *Angèle*'s third section, the return to the farm, is longer than the first two put together; the movie drags on for two and a quarter hours in all, even though a fully detailed description of the story couldn't run longer than a paragraph. And after Demazis's early scenes, where she displays some spunk, her performance gets caught on a single masochistic, fallen-women note. Demazis, with her Piaf/Fanny Brice doomed-waif face, could be poignant; though it's been

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years since I've seen *Marius*, I still remember what she looked like when the ship's whistle blew in the harbor and she realized she'd lost her lover forever. In *Angèle* she has one terrific scene: when the pimp courts her in the woods, she giggles like a schoolgirl as he tries to guess her name, and when she tells him what it is and he makes a pretty speech in reply, Demazis lets us see the seductive effect of his practiced words. Her whole face lights up — and so, for a moment, does the movie. *At the Coolidge Corner, Sunday through Tuesday February 7-9.*

— Steve Vineberg