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Var. **ARLETTE**
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An AMLF release (in France) of a Katharina/Renn, TF1 Films, MDG, Films Flam production, in association with Canal Plus. (International sales: Canal Plus, Paris.) Produced by Claude Berri. Executive producer, Pierre Grunstein.

Directed by Claude Zidi. Screenplay, Zidi, Josiane Balasko. Camera (color, widescreen), Jean-Jacques Tarbes; editor, Nicole Saunier; music, William Sheller; production design, Christian Marti; costume design, Fabienne Katany; sound (Dolby), Pierre Gamet; assistant directors, Denis Seurat, Julien Zidi. Reviewed at Pathe Wepler Theater, Paris, April 16, 1997. Running time: 101 MIN.

Arlette Josiane Balasko
Franck Christophe Lambert
Angelo Ennio Fantastichini
Victor Jean-Marie Bigard
Chef Martin Lamotte
Lucie Armelle

With: Jean-Pierre Castaldi, Stephane Audran, Ronny Coutteure, Jed Allan, David Fresco, Renee Lee, Robert Queluz-Odell.

Josiane Balasko, France's beloved Roseanne-like comedienne, tries spiritedly to keep Claude Zidi's "Arlette" afloat, but lazy pacing and laughably bad plot twists make the pic sink like a stone. Although the elements for success are all here in this story of a nefarious lothario out to seduce and then deliver to hit men an unwitting heiress, the slapdash execution seems a throwback to the cheap and brayingly unfunny comedies that afflicted French movie screens in the '70s. Initial local B.O. may coast on Balasko's drawing power, but word of mouth will brake any momentum. Yet, for all its flaws, "Arlette" possesses good remake potential.

Helmer Zidi's history of smart, accessible comedies, most notably in the '80s with his "Association de malfaiteurs" and Cesar-winning "Les ripoux," augured well for this 22nd feature. After penning a characteristically flamboyant storyline, Zidi turned to Balasko for the dialogue, which shows her abundant talent for lowbrow repartee and the zinging insult. But what must have looked good on paper is killed by inexplicably incompetent direction and a ten-

dency to telegraph every gag.

The action begins promisingly. Franck (Christophe Lambert), a killer-whale tamer at a sea-world theme park and a heavily indebted gambler in Vegas, is forcibly recruited by the dishonest partners of a dying zillionaire, who have finally found his only natural heir — Arlette (Balasko), a fortysomething waitress in France. If handsome Frank can woo, win and marry Arlette, the partners will then bump her off, whereupon everyone in Las Vegas, except the dying old gent, unaware of his heiress, will be the happier.

Frank is unleashed on truck-stop France, where plump hash-slinger Arlette deals with untoward comments and supposedly hilarious food fights in scenes straight out of Capra-world, circa 1935. Eventually, in a chamber-of-commerce tour of Monaco, the honest-at-heart Frank wins the smitten Arlette, and the two, now in full disclosure, scheme to outwit his Vegas paymasters.

This out-scheming is done through a pathetically hokey animal effect and several Z-movie action sequences, none of which display any wit or credibility. Despite brave perms by both Lambert and Balasko, and hammy presences by bodyguard/killer Angelo (Ennio Fantastichini) and trucker/suitor Victor (Jean-Marie Bigard), nothing can bring this picture close to the shore of verisimilitude.

Tech credits, as in all Zidi pics, are fine, as are Fabienne Katany's costumes and Christian Marti's sets. Indeed, pic seems like an expensive property let by an absentee landlord: The costly architecture — script, cast, crew — is there in abundance, but no one is around to make sure the edifice stands. The film's one truly amusing sight gag, which shows the bulging Balasko in a bare-bottomed decollete evening gown, is milked to squirm-in-your-seat boredom.

— Stephen O'Shea