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THREE LIVES AND ONLY ONE DEATH

(TROIS VIES
ET UNE SEULE MORT)

(FRENCH)

A Gemini Filma/La Sept Cinema co-production in association with Madragoa Filmes, in participation with Canal Plus. (International sales, Gemini Films.) Produced by Paulo Branco.

Directed by Raoul Ruiz. Screenplay, Ruiz, Pascal Bonitzer. Camera (Kodak color), Laurent Machuel; editor, Rodolfo Wedeless; music, Jorge Ariagada; production design, Luc Chalon; sound, Laurent Poirier, Gerard Rousseau. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (competing), May 17, 1996. Running time: 124 MIN.

Mateo Strano/

Georges Vickers/

Butler/Luc

Allamand Marcello Mastroianni

Tania Anna Galiena

Maria Marisa Paredes

Martin Melvil Poupaud

Cecile Chiara Mastroianni

Helene Arielle Dombasle

Andre Feodor Atkine

Tania's Husband Jacques Pieller

Mario Jean-Yves Gautier

Radio Narrator Pierre Bellemare

Bum Lou Castel

Up to now the prolific and ever self-renewing director Raoul Ruiz, a Chilean-born citizen of the world, has been largely an acquired taste for the cognoscenti willing to follow him on his cultural voyages. But with the surprisingly accessible and eminently enjoyable "Three Lives and Only One Death," set in Paris in August and spotlighting the masterful Marcello Mastroianni in a quadruple role, Ruiz stands to gain much wider arthouse admiration. The film is poised to open around continental Europe, and despite a rather overlong two-hour running time, it may be expected to fill in the missing territories after winning kudos on the Croisette.

Dealing with things as various as pathological psychology, storytelling, magic and the Maastricht treaty, the film takes the viewer on a merry chase through Mastroianni's amazing split personalities. Inspired by writers like Hawthorne and Pirandello, Ruiz and his co-scripter, Pascal Bonitzer, have decorated the pic with more witty cultural references than flowers on French wallpaper. The viewer is free to delve as deeply as desired, or just sit back and laugh at these weird tales, recounted in voiceover by a deadpan radio announcer (Pierre Bellemare).

The first of Mastroianni's personalities we meet is Mateo Strano, a traveling salesman who walked out of his Parisian apartment one day and hasn't been seen since by wife Maria (Marisa Paredes.) Twenty years later he's back, pouring his story into the unwilling ear of Maria's new husband, Andre (Feodor Atkine.) It seems that he's been living across the street all this time, bewitched by fairies. Persuaded to accompany Mateo back to his apartment, Andre finds a hammer embedded in his head when he refuses to switch roles with the mad stranger. Mateo cheerfully buries



IDENTITY PROBLEM: *Marcello Mastroianni and Anna Galiena limn multiple personalities in "Three Lives and Only One Death."*

him in the garden and goes home to Maria, who takes the new developments in stride and calmly shows Mateo "their" adopted baby girl.

The second case of split personality is Georges Vickers, professor of negative anthropology at the Sorbonne. One day he leaves the wealthy home of his ill-tempered mother and takes up the life of a homeless street tramp. This is how he meets the fascinating, sexy hooker Tania (Anna Galiena), whose only fault in his eyes is her appreciation of writer Carlos Castaneda. (Castaneda's literary character Don Juan, a Mexican wizard who preached the mystery of "two worlds touching," returns throughout the film as a disquieting idea.)

One day Vickers comes to himself and returns to his responsibilities, only to learn Tania has also been leading a double life: She is really the president of a huge corporation. He uses his influence to get her out of jail for trying to murder her perverse ex-husband (Jacques Pieller), and they get married.

If any cutting is to be done, it should be in the third tale, where a tiresome lovey-dovey young couple, Cecile (Chiara Mastroianni) and Martin (Melvil Poupaud), live happily in a poor garret until a mysterious benefactor bequeaths them a magnificent chateau complete with a silent butler (Mastroianni again) who appears only when they ring a bell. Realizing the butler (who is really the chateau owner) is poisoning them, they flee. But he finds them and demands their baby daughter, whom he takes to Maria, who adopts her.

From this point on there begins to be an unsettling overlap of characters. Mastroianni's fourth personality is a rich industrialist, Luc Allamand, who is disconcerted to learn that a wife, daughter and sister he has invented to favor his worldwide business interests are arriving in town. To escape this intolerable situation he turns back into Mateo, then the butler, then Professor Vickers. Only now is it clear that one and the same person has been living these parallel, incompatible but horribly interlocked lives.

A superb storyteller, Ruiz functions like a magician keeping his audience entranced, though it is doubtful whether the film would spring to life in such a delightful way without an actor of Mastroianni's caliber to bring out the story's playfulness.

Instead of trying to differentiate his multiple personalities, he is the same gentle, confused, apologetic person in all of them — a role that perhaps not by coincidence sums up many others in his long career.

Numerous members of the supporting cast make major contributions, from the irresistibly sexy Galiena and the stuttering, spooky Pieller, to Paredes' glowing, unflappable wife whose husbands have a habit of disappearing, and Chiara Mastroianni as the charming, fresh and completely unsexy girl next door.

But the film also works on other levels for viewers adept at reading Ruiz's visual gags and multilingual puns. One point that is made repeatedly is that people lose their identities on Rue Maastricht, and the Europeanization of culture is a sickness that is spreading among politicians, artists, sports stars — everybody.

Spurious psychologists doubling as Euro-parliamentarians claim that a split personality is a sign of success, and press people to become interchangeable. Pic may be a witty, ironic game of suspended disbelief, but underneath the fun, the confusion of the age is shown taking a heavy toll.

Echoing the story is amusing, original tech work across the board. Cinematographer Laurent Machuel plays with split screen and other humorous f/x, particularly entrancing in the fairy sequence.

Editor Rodolfo Wedeless has brilliantly intercut scenes to heighten mystery until the time comes to dispel the confusion. Luc Chalon's tongue-in-cheek set design includes some truly surreal objects that remain in memory — the sculpture of a double staircase, that buzzing French floral wallpaper. Jorge Ariagada's old-fashioned score follows the action closely, adding gongs and bells as portents and romantic motifs recalling a bygone, cinematic Paris. —Deborah Young