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MONTREAL

NIGHTCAP

(MERCİ POUR LE CHOCOLAT)

(FRANCE-SWITZERLAND)

An MK2 Diffusion release (in France) of an MK2 Prods. (France)/CAB Prods. (Switzerland) production, in association with France 2 Cinema, Television Suisse Romande, YMC Prods., with participation of Canal Plus, Office Fédéral de la Culture, Suisse Succes Cinema, Teleclub. (International sales: MK2, Paris.) Produced by Marin Karmitz. Executive producer, Jean-Louis Porchet.

Directed by Claude Chabrol. Screenplay, Caroline Eliacheff, Chabrol, based on the novel "The Chocolate Cobweb" by Charlotte Armstrong. Camera (color), Renato Berta; editor, Monique Fardoulis; music, Matthieu Chabrol; art director, Yvan Niclass; costume designer, Elisabeth Tavernier; sound (Dolby Digital), Jean-Pierre Duret; assistant director, Cecile Maistre. **Reviewed at World Film Festival, Montreal (competing), Aug. 2, 2000. (Also in Venice Film Festival — noncompeting; Toronto Film Festival — Masters.)** Running time: 99 MIN.

Marie-Claire

"Mika" Muller Isabelle Huppert
Andre Polonski Jacques Dutronc
Jeanne Pollet Anna Mouglalis
Guillaume Polonski Rodolphe Pauly
Dufreigne Michel Robin
Louise Pollet Brigitte Catillon
Axel Mathieu Simonet

By DEREK ELLEY

Nightcap" is a treat, a delicious blend of perversity, playfulness and deadly passion concealed beneath the tranquil, moneyed surface of the Swiss bourgeoisie. Claude Chabrol's 48th movie reps an even stronger career rebound than his 1995 "La ceremonie," also starring Isabelle Huppert and co-scripted by child psychologist Caroline Eliacheff. This classic Chabrol crimer, fit to stand alongside his late-'60s career highs, looks set for warm servings on the art-house circuit following acclaim at key fests.

In poise and double-edged delivery, Huppert, who shared the best actress prize at the Montreal fest for her work, is commanding in a way that transcends her physical size as Marie-Claire "Mika" Muller, boss of her late father's venerable Swiss chocolate company, which she runs with a hand of steel. As pic opens, Mika is re-exchanging vows — and even the same rings — with Andre Polonski, a concert pianist to whom she was briefly married 18 years earlier.

In the interim, Andre married Lisbeth and had a son, Guillaume (Rodolphe Pauly), now a moody teen who shows no interest in his father's calling and veers more toward the art world. Mika and Andre's remarriage is the talk of Lausanne society and resuscitates an old story: that on the night of his birth, due to a mix-up at the hospital, Guillaume was almost exchanged for another baby.

That other baby has since grown into Jeanne (Anna Mouglalis), a lithe, talented 18-year-old piano student who is studying for a competition in Budapest. Hearing the yarn by chance one day, she impulsively visits Andre at the secluded hilltop home he now shares with Mika. Andre, initially cool, says he's also heard the story but doesn't believe it; however, the two

quickly bond over their shared love of music and Mika, hovering in the background like the perfect hostess, invites her to stay for a drink.

As Mika politely shows Jeanne around the house, including pictures of the late Lisbeth, alarm bells are already going off in the quick-witted girl's mind. How come she is musically talented and Guillaume isn't? Why does she look more like Lisbeth than her apparent mom (Brigitte Catillon)? How come Lisbeth happened to die in a car accident 12 years ago when she and her family were visiting Mika? And why did Mika deliberately spill in her presence a thermos full of a nightcap of hot chocolate?

When Jeanne later tells her b.f. (Mathieu Simonet) about the event, he jokingly suggests that the hot chocolate was maybe poisoned. Next day, after testing some remains on Jeanne's scarf, he reports it contained a mild sleeping drug often used in rape cases.

This is vintage Chabrol territory, with action that's stripped down to a series of conversations and prandial gatherings, plus dialogue that veers between (on the elders' side) exchanges pregnant with unspoken thoughts and (on the youngsters') conversations full of impulsive emotions.

One can imagine the twinkle in the helmer's eye as he gleefully lays out a plot that's borderline ridiculous without any attempt to convince the viewer otherwise. By adopting a rarefied approach, in which the practical details of life never intrude, Chabrol positions his characters like a chess player and, like Fritz Lang and Alfred Hitchcock (both jokingly referenced at one point), lets the game proceed according to its own rules. Following this wonderful setup during the first half-hour, pic fans out into an elaborate, darkly playful comedy of manners in which Chabrol manipulates the viewer's expectations.

As with their adaptation of Brit crime writer Ruth Rendell's "A Judgment in Stone" into the French-set "La ceremonie," Chabrol and Eliacheff have taken a foreign-lingo novel — Charlotte Armstrong's long out of print 1948 "The Chocolate Cobweb" — and made it totally their own.

A U.S. mystery-suspense writer who flourished during the '40s to '60s but is now largely forgotten, the late Armstrong (pen name for Jo Valentine) wrote "Cobweb" from the p.o.v. of the murderer. (Intriguingly, she also contributed to the TV series "Alfred Hitchcock Presents.")

Set in various locations in elegant, lakeside Lausanne, pic has a cast without a weak link. Gleefully seizing with both hands the role of black widow spider Mika, Huppert is commandingly elegant, and well contrasted with Dutronc, who underplays the more disheveled, apparently easygoing Andre.

Mouglalis, a relative newcomer, holds her own in the experienced thespians' company, and Catillon, in several scenes with Huppert, is a strong, assured presence as Jeanne's mom. Veteran Michel Robin pops up for light relief as one of Mika's crusty old employees.

The helmer's son Matthieu, again supplying the music, contrives a piano piece which recurs at intervals as Andre and Jeanne practice in the house, accompanying not only a magical scene of their artistic bond-

ing but also the film's long final take, in which, as the end credits also appear, the door metaphorically clangs shut on the crimes of the bourgeoisie — a very Chabrolian touch. Other tech credits are simple and precise, with special kudos to Renato Berta's clean, wintry lensing.

Pic's French title, which is far more sardonic than "Nightcap," is based on the Gallic translation of Armstrong's novel, "— et merci pour le chocolat."

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