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ARTS & PEOPLE.

FILMS

'The Last Metro'

Francols Truffaut's "The Last Metro," which closed the New York Film Festival Sunday night, is set in a tiny Parisian theater during the Occupation. The company has lost its leader, who has had to flee the Nazis, but his wife is trying to hold the troupe together, carrying forth the production of a Norwegian play her husband has unearthed and annotated. We get a few glimpses of the play, which seems thoroughly conventional. We cannot help but be amused at the seriousness and concentration the actors invest in this artificial drama, seeing, as we do, how much more harrowing their own lives are.

Each of them has a darker, truer identity beneath the "on with the show" surface he projects: several are homosexuals; one is in the Resistance; the wife is, in fact, concealing her Jewish husband in the cellar of the theater.

Even under normal circumstances, society sometimes forces us to don masks; in an oppressive regime, the masks become more essential, for the slightest variance from the norm threatens not merely one's social stability but one's very existence. What is at stake in this tiny theater is hardly Art — more important than the play the actors present to audiences often dominated by German soldiers and collaborators is the fragile community they have established among themselves, subordinating private wills to preserve a vestige of humanity in the face of monstrous odds.

In other hands, this story might have been grandiose or melodramatic. In Truffaut's, it is unutterably moving. Most of the scenes are short, focusing on simple, often comic details, often framed in such a way that, to catch things happening in the distance, we must be as suspicious and alert as members of such a society. The cumulative



Catherine Deneuve and Gerard Depardieu

effect, as we penetrate the secrets of this community and perceive the ominousness of the world around it, is of an almost unbearable tension, broken only by the Liberation, when, we realize, a new series of masks is donned. These are not as strenuous to maintain, nor is there anything heroic about their maintenance.

"The Last Metro" is full of beautiful performances, all the more powerful for their subtlety and restraint. Catherine Deneuve, one of the most haunting faces in the history of the cinema, gives one of her most eloquent characterizations as the actress trying to hold her company together and keep her own emotions in check. Gerard Depardieu, who generally plays early Brando swaggerers, gives a sensitive performance as a young actor. Heinz Bennet is perfect as the husband in hiding,

particularly in a scene where he muses on what it means "to look Jewish." The character of the villain, an anti-Semitic journalist, may seem melodramatic, but it is modeled precisely on the scabrous French journalist Alain Laubreaux, and Jean-Louis Richard plays the role convincingly. Jean Poiret, one of the most charming of French actors, is touching as Deneuve's assistant, trying to hold things together.

Nestor Almendros' cinematography captures the bleak feeling of Paris under German rule. "The Last Metro" is not simply a backstage story; it is a poignantly comic, moving study of people under siege. To call it one of the best films of the year hardly means anything this year; to call it one of Truffaut's best may do it justice.

— HOWARD KISSEL