Anatomy of a Fall

Review by Vince LePlavy

There's an undeniable appeal to French cinema. Whether it's the devil-may-care style of Godard's New Wave classics or the tongue-in-cheek approach to fascinating topics explored by Agnès Varda, the lens through which life is viewed is always fascinating and original. That same lens is utilized with profound precision in Justine Triet's *Anatomy of a Fall*. Through the use of language and technology coupled with some exceptional performances, Triet takes an irreparable incident and shows how its effects ripple out over time and through the people involved in it.

Sandra Hüller (of *Toni Erdmann* fame and the upcoming *Zone of Interest)* plays Sandra, a German writer under investigation for the death of her husband in the snowy French countryside. Her 11-year-old blind son is the only witness to the event and it's up to Sandra to prove her innocence in the ensuing trial. This is a showcase for Hüller who plays Sandra as complicated but inescapably human; she wholeheartedly carries the emotional weight of the film with steadfast subtlety that manifests over the film's 2 1/2-hour runtime. Another distinct highlight is established actor Swann Arlaud as Sandra's lawyer Vincent. The man aims to accomplish his job to the fullest while remaining adamant about the moralistic approach he takes under such unfavorable circumstances. Arlaud does wonders with the material and magnetizes it to maximum effect with a simmering tenacity. Milo Machado-Graner surpasses stereotypes as Sandra's son Daniel who brings to light the most important pieces of the case and provides a touch of lost innocence that rings only too true amidst the assembly of adult characters. When put together the three actors play off each other like pinball clockwork. All in all it's a trove of understated performances that create a tight and affecting ensemble.

One of the most alluring facets of the film is the use of technology and how it assists authorities in understanding what happened to Sandra's husband Samuel. There are multiple instances of contemporary tech used in the investigation that don't come off as flashy plot crutches and only add to the heart of the story. The articulate recreation of the incident by local law enforcement is concise and thorough with an attention to detail that's a pleasure to watch unfold as Sandra is forced to relive the incident step by step. The trial itself is an examination into how the human memory can be reassessed at the hands of sound recordings and mock visual representations. It also doubles as a battleground for Arlaud's defense attorney and the appointed prosecutor (Antoine Reinartz) to duke it out with witty vigor sorely missed in many American courtroom dramas of past and present. It's a slow-burn sight to behold.

Another underlying theme that surrounds the entire story is language itself. Sandra, being a born and bred German, must learn to speak French to adapt to her living situation in her husband's native country. In the courtroom she must improve upon it in order to communicate to the jury and committee of judges who represent the state of France. Her very innocence wavers on the precipice of that incalculable language barrier. English serves as a middle ground that Sandra uses when in need to express herself with full emotional embodiment; these scenes where she flips between all three dialects truly exemplify Hüller's acting prowess. The back and forth of this trifecta of tongues keeps audiences on their toes and makes for audibly arresting interactions amongst many characters within the film.

There are never any easy answers, only hard questions. Justine Triet takes a simple act of nature and picks it apart with a meticulous gaze that leaves no stone unturned and viewers grappling for more. With a deserved Palme d'Or win under its belt, *Anatomy of a Fall* lands on its feet as an expertly made modern procedural that more American filmmakers need take heed from.

Coming to BAFS Winter 2024