

review: *Pas douce (Parting Shot)* (Berlinale 2007)

Written by Boyd van Hoeij

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Swiss-born writer-director Jeanne Waltz (who has mainly worked in Portugal) returns back home for the effective low-key drama *Pas douce (Parting Shot)*, part of the Forum here at the Berlinale. Rising French star Isild Le Besco (*L'Intouchable/The Untouchable*) gives her strongest performance to date as a Swiss nurse who seriously wounds a tempestuous teenager when she tries to comment suicide and then has to care for him daily in her hospital ward. The simple premise is effectively executed in an old-fashioned -- but never musty -- way that recalls the work of crime writers such as Patricia Highsmith who are more interested in the effects of crime on human behaviour than the crimes per se. The film very much deserves wider exposure at festivals and in European arthouses.



"Everyone says you don't have problems with the dead," Frédérique or Fred (Le Besco) is told by one of her colleagues early on in the film. "Don't believe everything they say," she replies dryly, only hours before going to see her ex boyfriend to say goodbye because she is going on a trip "somewhere" for an indefinite time. A champion sharpshooter in her youth, Fred has grown up to become a nurse who feels isolated enough from the world to decide that it might as well go on turning without her. When, on a secluded spot in the forest, the moment has come to pull the trigger, Fred shoots a young pest who has just used his sling on his schoolmate in the groves below instead.

Is it the shock of possibly having taken a life that does not belong to her that makes her feel alive, or the simple realisation that she could not possibly shoot herself? Whatever the reason, Fred has returned to the land of the living and takes up her daily routine again as if nothing has happened -- until she sees the victim turn up on her ward. Marco (Steven de Almeida) is a 14-year-old son of a divorced Portuguese mother (Lio) and a Swiss father (Yves Verhoeven) and has plenty of issues of his own, including uncontrollable outbursts of anger that soon make Fred's colleagues turn their patient over to her.

Waltz, who also wrote the script, treads lightly where others might have turned this story into a lurid melodrama or soap opera. Using a carefully restrained register, the director does not only make the story believable but even -- and quite surprisingly -- touching. Le Besco's performance is key here, but De Almeida matches her every step of the way. Their relationship is hard to describe: they are not lovers or friends but two young and damaged individuals who recognise something of themselves in each other. There is also a very slight but unmistakable hint of a kind of twisted, two-way version of the Stockholm syndrome that lurks just beneath the surface.

In good films at least one scene stands out, but here there are many: Fred cycling down a mountain straight into a lake to test whether she still feels something; Marco and his friend Jérémie (who hurt his eye because of Marco's sling attack) wanting to see a dead person in the hospital morgue; Marco telling Fred why he wanted to hurt Jérémie with his sling and Fred in a postcoital moment with her ex, touching the precise spot on her back where he has kissed her just before leaving. *Pas douce* handles its secondary characters with just as much care, thus creating a fully populated cosmos around Fred that includes not only an ex boyfriend but also a friend with a daughter who works at the local watering hole; a random one-night stand; a male nurse in love and the laundry lady at the hospital. The police also always seem to be lurking in the background, as if to remind Fred that she has committed a crime.

In *Pas douce* (literally "Not gentle", something a one-night stand calls Fred during intercourse) what counts is not the suspense or the resolution of the question whether Marco or the police will find out what Fred has done, but rather how Fred lives with it herself and how the daily confrontation with what she has done might make her a better person. In this sense, *Pas douce* is a religious film as much as the work of the Dardenne brothers, whose washed-out look, emotional depth of character and apparently simple stories this work resembles.