

Two Couples Collide, With a Roman Beauty as Muse and Catalyst

Philippe Garrel's 'Burning Hot Summer,' With Monica Bellucci

A BURNING HOT SUMMER Directed by Philippe Garrel | Drama | Not Rated | 1h 35m

By MANOHLA DARGIS JUNE 28, 2012



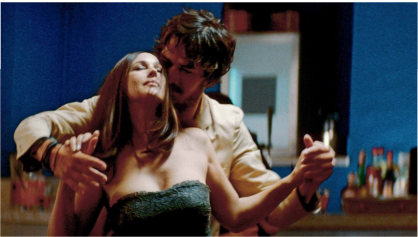
Monica Bellucci and Louis Garrel play an artistic couple in a tempestuous marriage in "A Burning Hot Summer." IFC Films

Not long after Philippe Garrel's languid, emotionally raw film "A Burning Hot Summer" opens, its lonely beauty, *Frédéric* ([Louis Garrel](#), the director's son), dies. He's first seen standing next to his BMW at a gas station, taking pulls from a flask, his hair and clothes disheveled. He looks more distracted than disturbed, but a few beats later, when he's speeding behind the wheel down a dark highway, you see that his eyes are glassy.

An abrupt cut to a naked woman, lying across an electric-blue cloth and mutely gesturing toward the camera, implies a reason for his tears. But it doesn't prepare you for when he closes his moist eyes — as if to blot out her image — and crashes. This shock is followed by another: "Frédéric is dead," the voice of his friend Paul (Jérôme Robart), announces against a black screen. This void soon fills, at least visually, with characters, conversations and complications that can seem random but gather in force.

Philippe Garrel, whose films include "Regular Lovers" (set against the turmoil of France in May 1968) and "Frontier of Dawn" (a love story involving one man and two women), creates worlds that spring from a poetic, deeply personal sense of life rather than a screenwriting manual. People find and lose love, make up or don't. They pass the time, time passes them by. In "A Burning Hot Summer" (a pulpy title that sounds better in the original, "Un Été Brûlant"), two men fall into friendship, and while little happens, everything is at stake.

Frédéric's life is conspicuously on the line, although it takes the entirety of the film to grasp why and how he ended up cracking up on a dark road. This gives "A Burning Hot Summer" the superficial aspect of a mystery, even if its deeper enigmas turn on secrets of the heart. Even so, the accident hangs over the film and suggests a narrative motivation that isn't always self-evident.



Ms. Bellucci and Jérôme Robart in a dance scene, IFC Films

Mr. Garrel's stories may be fairly straightforward, but his storytelling is purposefully oblique. He doesn't connect the dots and instead allows you to consider each narrative fragment, every seemingly atomized scene, before moving toward the pointillist whole. Here and elsewhere you linger in moments that, like memories and dreams, can feel severed from storybook time.

An early instance of this fragmentation is that image of the naked woman stretched out across the screen like one of art's innumerable courtesans, a bent leg demurely obscuring her pubis. It's initially unclear if this vision is a fantasy, a memory of a model who once posed for Frédéric or a feverish hallucination of a private reverie. (It certainly seems like one of several nods in the film to Jean-Luc Godard's 1963 masterpiece, "[Contempt](#)," featuring the naked Brigitte Bardot lying prone across a bed.) Crucially, the woman here seems to be saying something as she reaches toward the camera, though you can't make out what. Only later, when she's introduced as Frédéric's wife and onetime muse, Angèle ([Monica Bellucci](#)), do the fragments start to cohere.

Angèle is a rising Italian actress with whom Frédéric lives, with increasing unhappiness, in Rome. Shortly after Paul announces that Frédéric has died, he begins recounting in voice-over how they first met. A mutual friend, believing the men would hit it off, arranged a rendezvous. In flashback Paul visits Frédéric at a luxurious apartment filled with paintings and gilded antiques and where, sprawled on a golden-edged chaise — a pose that echoes that of the naked Angèle — Frédéric declares that he never should have moved to Rome. "All that dead beauty is so uninspiring." Soon afterward there's a cut to Angèle removing a sliver from Frédéric's foot, a kindness that invokes the tale of the slave Androcles who, by removing a thorn from a lion's paw, earned its grateful servitude.

This isn't to say that Angèle is the Roman beauty that Frédéric finds so uninspiring, or that she's tamed him. Rather, these are moments that — like Paul and Frédéric's relationship, which turns on the erotics of friendship rather than on grinding bodies — add to the dense layering of ideas about men, women, friendship, death, desire and art circulating through the film.

As the story unfolds, Paul falls for another actress, Elisabeth (Céline Sallette), and together they visit Frédéric and Angèle in Rome. There, amid dinners, fights, a shiver of politics and bursts of color, they struggle to cross the divide between the self and another person, to fill the void, to find a purpose, a way to live. At times Mr. Garrel suggests that there's something impossible about love, but then he is a Romantic — of a dreamy, melancholic type.

A Burning Hot Summer

Director Philippe Garrel

Writers Marc Cholodenko, Caroline Deruas-Garrel, Philippe Garrel

Stars Monica Bellucci, Louis Garrel, Céline Sallette, Jérôme Robart, Vladislav Galard

Rating Not Rated

Running Time 1h 35m

Genre Drama

IMDb Movie data powered by IMDb.com
Last updated: Nov 2, 2017