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Parting Shot

Pas Douce

(France-Switzerland) A Bloody Mary Prods. (France)/Prince Film (Switzerland) production, in association with Television Suisse Romande, Rhone-Alpes Cinema. (International sales: Pyramide Intl., Paris.) Produced by Didier Haudepin. Executive producers, Haudepin, Pierre-Hain Meier. Co-producers, Gregory Faes, Nathalie Huchard, Philippe Berthet. Directed, written by Jeanne Waltz.

With: Isild Le Besco, Steven De Almeida, Lio, Yves Verhoeven, Philippe Villeumier, Jocelyn Desverchere, Christophe Sermet, Maxime Kathari.

By **DEREK ELLEY**

After her utterly convincing turn as an obsessive fan in "Backstage," French actress Isild Le Besco creates another creepy portrait of monomania in "Parting Shot." Impressive first feature by Basel-born helmer Jeanne Waltz is part psychological study, part personal epiphany as a bungled suicide attempt forces a young woman to connect more with society around her. Tightly woven drama, driven by Le Besco's performance, could bounce from fest airings into niche distribution.

Le Besco plays Frederique Bornoz, aka Fred, a nurse in an unnamed mountain town near the French-Swiss border. (Pic was shot around La Chaux-de-Fonds and Chamonix.) A one-time junior rifle champ, Fred is a loner who doesn't get on with her father (Philippe Villeumier), divorces herself emotionally from her patients at work and seems generally at the end of her tether.

When she tells her ex-b.f., border guard Andre (Christophe Sermet), that she's leaving town for good in a few days, she's upset when he says he's already seeing a new woman. After a bout of impulsive sex with two male friends, she takes her rifle to the woods and prepares to quietly blow her brains out.

Fate then springs a life-changing surprise, as two kids, Marco (Steven De Almeida) and Jeremy (Maxime Kathari), pass nearby and disturb her concentration. In a burst of unfathomable rage, Fred fires a single shot at them, her marksman's bullet grazing Jeremy and smashing Marco's knee. As the kids lie wounded, Fred flees the scene.

In a further ironic turn of fate, Marco ends up in the same hospital ward where Fred works. Denied a transfer by her boss, she's daily reminded of her impulsive behavior as the 14-year-old boy looks likely to be crippled for life. But here scripter Waltz adds another twist: far from being a lovable, sympathetic victim, Marco turns out to be an ornery young teen who insults his parents (Yves Verhoeven, Lio) and gives his mom, now divorced, a particularly hard time.

That's just the start of a complex relationship between nurse and patient over which Fred's secret hangs heavy. In the end, after several more unexpected turns, it's a relationship that proves strangely liberating for both of them.

In the early going, the viewer is asked to take a lot of Fred's emotional turmoil on trust. But as Le Besco tones down her distressed perf in the second half and De Almeida becomes more sympathetic, the chemistry between the two is often remarkable, with the kid thesp especially impressive.

Writer-director Waltz, with a decade of shorts behind her, keeps the 83-minute pic taut throughout, with hardly a wasted scene. Small changes in emotional calibration are beautifully handled, and the atmosphere of a small mountain town, remote from the wider world, is captured via unfussy helming. Supporting perfs are all on the money.

French title, literally "Not Soft," is how Fred describes her own lovemaking to one of her pickups.

Camera (color), Helene Louvart; editor, Eric Renault; music, Cyril Ximenes; art director, Françoise Arnaud; costumes, Catherine Schneider, Isabelle Blanc; sound (DTS stereo), Henri Maikoff; assistant director, Marc Atge; casting, Marie-Christine Lafosse, Bruno Dupuis. Reviewed at Berlin Film Festival (Forum), Feb. 9, 2007. Running time: 83 MIN.