

Thelma

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By **ROBERT KOEHLER** 



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Proving himself adept at juggling difficult emotional elements, tyro helmer Pierre-Alain Meier applies considerable sobriety to the potentially explosive sexual drama "Thelma." A steady producer who has worked with several African helmers including Idrissa Ouedraogo and Pierre Yamaogo, Meier has fashioned here with co-scripters Lou Inglebert, Jacques Akchoti and Barbara Sobeck an intriguing road movie focusing on the shifting lives of complex characters. Drama studies the after-effects caused by a person who is transgender: the jealousies, confusions and conflicts. Pic's theatrical French release in June came in conjunction with a good range of fest appearances, indicating the possibility (however small) for export beyond the multiple producing countries.

Zurich cabby Vincent (Tavernier vet Laurent Schilling) has enough troubles without Thelma (Pascale Ourbih). She immediately strikes Vincent as someone different (a character that would be right at home in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's films) and has just been dumped by her older lover, Pierre (Francois Germond).

Thelma feels deceived by Pierre, claiming that he promised her trips and more, and wants to exact revenge with Vincent's help by going to the man's Crete residence and demanding cash. Vincent appears at first to be the perfect sop for her schemes since he's somewhat rootless and finds the troubled femme alluring. (Schilling presents masterful shades of ambiguity and puzzlement.)

But after a trip across the Italian border in Pierre's stolen car, Vincent freaks out when discovering Thelma's he-she endowment. This is the first of three crises that Meier and cast handle deftly with understatement. His camera is a fluent, observant mid-range that, along with the road movie aspect, recalls early Wim Wenders.

Everything in the film works against Thelma becoming an easy object of concern or misplaced sympathy. Indeed, in rookie thesp Ourbih's courageous hands, she is downright obnoxious and infuriatingly unpredictable, placing Vincent in an increasingly difficult position.

Pic ends on an oddly weak coda, but thesping is sometimes extraordinary, with a low-key manner rendering brief emotional blowups all the more powerful.

Lensing and overall production are sharp, while Calexico's accordion music is an ideal on-the-road accompaniment.

Thelma

Switzerland-France-Greece

PRODUCTION: A Robert Boner presentation of a Thelma Film/Cine Manufacture/Ideefixe Ltd. production. (International sales: East West Distribution, Paris.) Produced by Robert Boner, Pierre-Alain Meier, Fenia Cossovista, Xavier Grin. Directed by Pierre-Alain Meier. Screenplay, Lou Inglebert, Jacques Akchoti, Meier, Barbara Sobeck.

CREW: Camera (Schwarz Film color), Thomas Hardmeier; editor, Loredana Cristelli; music, Calexico, Yiorgos Mangas; production designer and set decorator, Monika Bregger; costume designer, Geraldine Orinovski; sound (Dolby Digital), Eric Vaucher; supervising sound editor, Jurg von Allmen; assistant director, Kamal Musale. Reviewed at Outfest Film Festival, L.A., July 18, 2002. (Also in Zurich, Vienna and Philadelphia Gay and Lesbian Film Festivals.) Running time: 94 MIN. (French, Italian & Greek dialogue.)

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