

THE *Hollywood* **REPORTER**

September 18th, 2013

Before the Winter Chill (Avant L'hiver): Telluride Review



The Bottom Line

A literary, slow-to-develop life-crisis drama that pays off nicely and will play well to seasoned followers of French cinema.

Venue

Telluride Film Festival

Opens

Nov. 27 (France, UGC)

Cast

Daniel Auteuil, Kristin Scott-Thomas, Leila Bekhti, Richard Berry

Director-screenwriter

Philippe Claudel

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Elegantly cool rather than downright chilly, novelist-turned-filmmaker **Philippe Claudel's** third feature has a distinctly literary feel, as it plants its dramatic seeds very methodically before accelerating to a startling denouement. Perhaps the closest thing to a **Claude Chabrol**-like x-ray of privileged-class French society within a thriller context since the master passed from the scene, *Before the Winter Chill* is not the easiest film to warm up to, but it builds slowly but surely to quite involving effect. There is little in this male menopausal story to appeal to younger viewers, but older loyalists appreciative of the fine points of aromatic French cinema will savor its qualities.

Claudel taught writing and literature in prisons for 11 years and his first feature, the internationally successful *I Loved You So Long*, focused on a woman just out of the slammer. But the only prison here is the supremely elegant, forest-enveloped home the beautiful Lucie (**Kristin Scott-Thomas**) impeccably maintains for her increasingly grumpy and distant husband Paul (**Daniel Auteuil**). Paul is the top surgeon at the local hospital and has everyone's respect, but he's increasingly rude to guests at home (they entertain often) and just disappears when he feels like it.

You can practically feel in the film's initial third the first several chapters of a modern novel (an American equivalent would be set on Long Island or in coastal Connecticut), with wealthy fiftysomething parents becoming fed up with their boringly privileged offspring, producing yet another perfect meal from their organic garden and generally maxing out on their not-a-blade-of-grass-out-of-place lifestyle. At least that would be a conventional analysis of Paul's malaise.

But something else is bugging him. While Lucie is preoccupied with a sister who's losing her mind, Paul starts receiving red flowers everyday from someone he soon deduces is a rather attractive Moroccan girl from town who has also thanked him for successful surgery on her he claims he didn't perform. When Paul spots her again at the hospital with his best friend and colleague, Gerard (**Richard Berry**), he becomes irrational and shortly thereafter assaults her in the street.

When they meet again, it's she, Lou (**Leila Bekhti**) who apologizes, and an odd sort of companionable relationship commences between them. Irritable now to the point that the head of the hospital insists he take a leave of absence, Paul becomes fixated on this woman likely 40 years his junior; to her apparent puzzlement, however, there's no sex sought. Still, late at night, Paul repeatedly drives to a dodgy industrial area to look for her among the cheap street hookers. Other times they'll have a civilized drink or an intimate walk in the park. The relationship is strange, perhaps partly, but not at all entirely, a matter of a surrogate daddy for her and a willing young thing fantasy on his part.

When some plot mechanisms finally click into place and true motives reveal themselves late-on, they're distressing and unsettling all around, resulting in a general wake-up call.

Claudel is very good at portraying the quotidian behavior of his mainly haute bourgeois characters and, like Chabrol, is very attentive to what they eat, as well as to how they behave and think. There are pin-prick psychological insights, such as when Gerard, who has long coveted Lucie, tells Paul that his main problem is that, "You've been too lucky." There is also an extraordinary scene in which an old, never-married Jewish woman, who believes she may not

survive an operation Paul will conduct on her the next day, recites to him the names of all her siblings and other family members who perished in the Holocaust; if she dies, she says, no one else will know their names and she wants him to have heard them.

Auteuil, who has put on a good deal of weight of late, is not afraid to be off-putting and unsympathetic, and it remains perplexing, in part, as to why his character so knowingly courts domestic disaster with his wife over a highly ambiguous relationship with Lou. “She takes me a long way back,” he quietly confesses at one point, referring to the young woman, a remark both vague and loaded.

As this story is all about Paul, Scott-Thomas doesn't have nearly as much to do here as she did in her memorable turn in Claudel's *I've Loved You So Long*. She does look exceptionally good and conveys a multitude of attitudes about her husband, nearly all of them disdainful, fed-up and otherwise negative, with great facial economy and directness. Bekhti (*A Prophet*) is spirited as the mysterious object of Paul's fascination.

The couple's home and surroundings are impeccably beautiful and the entire France-Luxembourg co-production was shot in the latter country.

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Opens: Nov. 27 (France) (UGC)

Production: Les Films du 24

Cast: Daniel Auteuil, Kristin Scott-Thomas, Leila Bekhti, Richard Berry

Director-screenwriter: Philippe Claudel

Producers: Yves Marmion, Romain Rojtman

Director of photography: Denis Lenoir

Production designer: Samuel Deshors

Editor: Elisa Aboulker

Music: Andre Dejezduk

98 minutes