



FILM REVIEW: The Midwife (Provost, 2017): France

Description

Posted and reviewed by [Larry Gleeson](#)

Cesar-award winning director, Martin Provost's latest film, [The Midwife](#), an official selection of the 2017 Berlin International Film Festival, is a bittersweet drama about the unlikely friendship that

develops between Claire, a talented but tightly wound midwife, portrayed by Catherine Frot, and Beatrice, the estranged, free-spirited mistress of Claire's late father, portrayed by Catherine Deneuve. Interestingly, Provost wrote his script with the two French actresses in mind for the lead roles of Claire and Beatrice.



In a printed interview distributed by Music Box Films, Provost, having been saved by a midwife at birth, insists his film work is not autobiographical. After learning of his difficult birth he sought out the midwife who gave her blood that allowed him to live. His efforts turned up nil as the hospital archives were destroyed. Consequently, he decided to pay tribute, in his own way, by dedicating his film to her and through her to all the women who work in the shadows, dedicating their lives to others, without expecting anything in return.



The film's opening scene delivery room's color palette of pink and blue pastels contrasting with cross-cutting establishing shots of earthy tones foreshadow what unfolds in the film's narrative as Provost unfolds the lives of two very different women. A non-diegetic score by Gregoire Hetzel, the film's musical composer, accompanies the scene and is repeated throughout in Claire's scenes reminiscent of "Peter and the Wolf." Meanwhile, a stunning mise-en-scene of daybreak is meticulously presented with an enormous tracking shot. A secondary, high, magnificent, omniscient point of view shot of Claire entering a building slowly tilts and pans to reveal the Porte Saint-Denis.



Another non-diegetic score, decidedly melancholic, accompanies the next scene as Claire hears someone at the door asking if she is the daughter of Olympic swimmer, Antoine Breton. It is Beatrice. And, this score is repeated in scenes with Beatrice. But, unbeknownst to Claire, Beatrice, living off winnings from illegal gambling dens, is destitute and quite possibly terminally ill. All of her life, Beatrice has lived casually, enjoying all that life has to offer with little regard for those around her much like La Fontaine's Grasshopper from "The Ant and The Grasshopper."

Yet, the two women slowly become a source of complementarity, of reciprocity, of wisdom. Their relationship is at the heart of the film: for Beatrice, the relationship becomes an opportunity to bring some light into Claire's life while possibly gaining a better understanding of her own life; and for Claire the relationship becomes an opportunity to rediscover her second mother, the one she chose at a time she was just becoming a young girl.

With *The Midwife*, Provost introduces a powerful thematic question on what is freedom. On the surface, it appears, Beatrice is the ultimate purveyor of freedom living without boundaries and outside the rules of society. However, upon closer scrutiny, her reality echoes of escapism. For Beatrice, Claire, whose lifestyle Beatrice has always rejected, becomes a conduit for a lasting freedom with the opportunity to create good, loving memories that will live on in Claire's mind.

Admittedly, some of the delivery room scenes in *The Midwife* are graphic. Nevertheless, the scenes create a remarkable sense of vulnerability and provide a bird's eye view of the fragility of life. Ultimately, *The Midwife* is a story of transmission and of transformation with Claire receiving the light of Beatrice and with Beatrice achieving a deeper understanding that life without others is nothing. Catherine Deneuve is as regal as she has ever been. Catherine Frot emits a chilling performance until warmed over by Deneuve's character performance. Costumer Bethsabée Dreyfus achieves a strong character sensibility in clothing the lead actresses. Thierry François' production design is the epitome of realism as both actresses are performing in extremely realistic settings of a delivery room and an illegal gambling den.

The Midwife is scheduled to open in Los Angeles and New York on July 21st, 2017 and is highly recommended.



Category

1. Feature Film

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