

Brave, if a bit thin

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Couture (M)

Showing at Alliance Francaise French Film Festival



French writer-director Alice Winocour's latest film features an unlikely pairing: high fashion and the fragility of life. In a casting coup, dual Oscar winner Angelina Jolie anchors the film, performing in French and English and offering perhaps the most emotionally exposed and quietly powerful performance of her career.

Jolie plays Maxine Walker, an American horror film director and divorcing mother visiting Paris to shoot a movie for fashion week (she's doing it for the money). Walker is wrangling an uncomfortably tight shooting schedule when she receives devastating news – she has breast cancer and cannot afford to delay treatment. Whether she is standing topless in a Paris doctor's surgery or fretting over how to break the news to her teenage daughter, Jolie skilfully embodies Maxine's shift from cool denial to stunned vulnerability and, ultimately, something approaching resilience. There is an awkward but tender fling with her French cinematographer (Louis Garrel) as she faces a reckoning: Maxine knows that after surgery, her body will never be the same.

Jolie's performance – and the audience's reaction to it – are no doubt informed by her personal history. Her French mother (Maxine's mother is also French) died prematurely from breast cancer, as did her grandmother. At risk of the same fate, the Maria star underwent a preventive double mastectomy – and talked about it, publicly and courageously. Like Maxine, Winocour is a breast cancer survivor and, visually, her film deploys a clever mirroring technique, as the red lines drawn on fashion mannequins mirror the pre-surgery marks a surgeon draws on Jolie's body. Couture focuses on two other women also working at Paris Fashion Week. One is rookie model Ada (An-yier Anei) from South Sudan, who was studying pharmaceutical science and is ambivalent about the modelling game. In one scene, while she shivers in the cold in a thin designer dress, a male photographer barks at the teenager to "seduce the camera".

The third key character is 30-something makeup artist Angele (Ella Rumpf), who wants to become a writer. Unfortunately, Winocour's script offers few insights into Angele's or Ada's inner lives, meaning these thinly sketched characters rarely engage us in the way Maxine does. This is not a formulaic film about one plucky woman's cancer journey. There are no ICU wards or beeping intravenous drips, and it has a subtly redemptive ending. Still, it would have been better if Winocour had brought a tighter focus to her film by concentrating on Maxine's journey, rather than stretching her narrative across three characters' story arcs and leaving her two supporting characters – like many fashion models – distinctly undernourished. (Rosemary Neill)



Angelina Jolie in Couture



Jodie Foster in A Private Life