

The genius of Jodie

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A Private Life (M)

Showing at Alliance Francaise French Film Festival



We already know Jodie Foster is brilliant. Her debut in the quirky and provocative world of French cinema adds yet another credential for an actor dripping in gold trophies: she is flawlessly, effortlessly fluent in the language of love.

The language of cinema, however – at least in *A Private Life* – is not quite as fluent in the art of storytelling.

A sophisticated comedy hinged on a suicide is already a difficult thing to pull off. Throw in absurdist dream sequences and uneven supporting performances and you get an enjoyable but slightly average romp. Directed by Rebecca Zlotowski, the film (*Vie privée* for the Francophiles among us) centres on American Lillian Steiner, a stiff psychiatrist incapable of crying who nonetheless sheds uncontrollable tears upon learning of the death of her patient Paula (Virginie Efira). The tone is immediately Hitchcockian: unable to accept that her therapy was ineffective, Steiner spends the rest of the film investigating Paula's death, convinced it was no accident.

Foster's performance is warm and expansive, her transition from composed stoicism to unruly insecurity utterly seamless. Her comic timing lands, and her scenes with ex-husband Gabriel (Daniel Auteuil) are brilliant in the fractures they create, often swallowing her deeper into her own unravelling sense of self.

As Zlotowski has noted, there is a "private, public and secret life" to every person, a tension the film navigates well enough, despite its tonal inconsistencies. At times, its overtly camp hypnosis sequences distract from the more endearing work of its veteran leads. At others, the disarming relationship between Foster and Auteuil elevates its quieter, sweeter moments into something genuinely touching.

The film has the qualities of both murder mystery and rom-com and keeps us guessing about whether it is examining a death or a rebirth. A recurring descent down a spiralling staircase (an obvious metaphor) dazzles under Zlotowski's direction. Yet the film ultimately falls short of its own ambitions. It teases at deeper themes to which it never commits and its exploration of a woman's worth in the face of failure remains at surface level. While Foster keeps us consistently engaged, the film raises an uncomfortable question: why do we know so little about a protagonist whose entire arc is built around revealing her own truth?

Some of that ambiguity is, in part, a relief. In a cinematic landscape where plots are often spelt out several times over to appease attention-deficit audiences, *A Private Life* never feels the need to.

It's an intriguing character study and there is something entertaining, even familiar, in watching a woman so stunned by death that she is finally shocked back into life. **(Bianca Farmakis) 🍷**