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Life on the edge with Edith Piaf

Deborah Nicol
 The Desert Sun
 June 14, 2007

Edith Piaf was destined for fame and stardom. Her life was too spectacularly tragic for anything else.

Torn from a drunk mother, tossed to a brothel-running grandmother and dragged away from an affectionate prostitute by a circus-performing father, young Piaf had no familiarity with stability or normality. Begging for change in trade for a song, she was never humbled by her situation.

In director Olivier Dahan's "La Vie en Rose," whether or not Piaf had a dime to her name (changed to mean "little sparrow"), she was brash and confident. Faltering in unfamiliar territory, she found footing in drinking. In a glass, with a pill or intravenously, Piaf led a rock star's life whether the chips were up or down.

Never slowing down, it is sometimes startling that she maintained success. Tireless friends, recognizing her talent and amused by her shameless vitality, nudged her towards the stage, though she performed on her own time. Her ego demanded attention and she selfishly gratified it.

Marion Cotillard ("A Good Year," "A Very Long Engagement") is phenomenal as Piaf. This is an award-worthy performance without the dramatics that usually squeezes the soap from a script. Ranging from boisterous early twenties to cancer-ravaged late forties (aging two years for every one), Cotillard's portrayal never feels false. Piaf's life insists upon extreme behavior, and Cotillard delivers without dwelling on weepy histrionics. The singer's mantra was best realized through her song, "No Regrets," and she lived life at full tilt from beginning to end.

Dahan illustrates Piaf's tumultuous life with two overlapping and driving story lines. The young and old accounts of her shooting star proceed chronologically, yet continually shift back and forth. Not so much a remembrance is presented as an explanation of her behavior. She conducts herself so outlandishly that her acquaintances must be familiar with these hardships from her past in order to excuse her present behavior.

Cinematographer Tetsuo Nagata films a beautifully choreographed scene that dissolves dream and reality as Piaf digests tragic information. To fantastic effect, what appears deceptive to the eye is actually fact and vice versa, until the entire vision melds into her being and she uses that pain in her stage performance.

And with every performance, Piaf's voice reflects the eras of her life. Initially deep and gritty, it is the underlying robust soulfulness of the street performer that draws listeners. Requested in clubs, she mimics bouncier pop tunes. Ultimately selling out concert halls, she has been trained to smooth out the rough edges and portray an understanding of every line. Unfortunately for those not fluent in French, only the latter half of the film has translated lyrics.

Piaf's lifestyle is exhausting, and yet it is easy to get pulled in for the ride. She was a restless soul that many tried to restrain, and at times it is hard to understand how she was tolerated. Yet tantrums and all, her unique spirit allowed for fertile ground to an amazing and undeniable talent, and this film does a remarkable job of portraying the chaos.



Picturehouse

'LA VIE EN ROSE'

Genre: Biography

Language: French with subtitles
 Starring: Marion Cotillard
 Director: Olivier Dahan
 Showing: Opens Friday.

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