

Claire Denis gets belated Buenos Aires premiere

Thirty-five shots of rum drunk at a gulp



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FILM REVIEW

French director Claire Denis may be best-known for *Beau Travail* (1999), a remarkable tribute to masculinity as a rite of passage, as a beautifully choreographed and perfectly executed portrait of men living alone and flexing Nature's muscle in the fading days of the Foreign Legion.

That same fascination with gender (which does not necessarily refer to sex) permeates her lauded *35 Shots of Rum* (2008), which has a belated, limited release in BA this week.

Trying to define Denis' body of work, or just one single piece of her entire oeuvre, is an exercise in breaking the code of an intricate encryption job. For all their simplicity, her characters may be multifaceted, but they are easy to spot in any milieu, even if Denis, as was the case with *Beau Travail*, chose to set the action on strange territory. *35 Shots of Rum* shifts the action, in geographical terms, much closer to home: a suburban dormitory city inhabited by immigrants trying to find and secure a place of their own.

While *Beau Travail* was all about loneliness and disaffection and the striking need to bond with strange bedfellows, *35 Shots of Rhum* does exactly the opposite. In *35 Shots...* the world revolves around two main characters: Lionel (Alex Descas) and Joséphine (Mati Diop), father and daughter living in peaceful, happy connection with one another.

The timing and rapport between middle-aged father and twenty-something daughter is as placid as the suburban landscape Lionel sees everyday as he commutes back and forth his job as factory worker. Joséphine moves around in perfect synch with her father, forging ahead with her plans for the future while enjoying every minute, every snippet of bliss arising from the filial relationship with Lionel.

Nothing much happens in *35 Shots of Rhum* by way of extraordinary circumstance. The lives of Lionel and Joséphine, and their neighbour-friends Gabrielle (Nicole Dogue) and Noé (Grégoire Colin) may be regarded as inconsequential, but there seems to be no point in looking further ahead, full of concern about tomorrow. Things go by, in the same manner that trains ride the same schedules day after day, save for unexpected, life-shattering occurrences.

The opening sequences of *35 Shots of Rhum* may not be spectacular as regards setting, frame or trigger. There are close and then long, extremely long shots of a railroad commute seen from a passenger's window, then shifting to a sweeping view from the locomotive. The scenes play to the ethereal music by Tindersticks, highlighted by the swooning *Nightshift*, by The Commodores. There's a new rice boiler father brings home after picking a red model from a neon-lit shelf. Contrived as it may seem, this very little take from ordinary lives condenses Lionel's and Joséphine's domestic bliss, as does the scene when Jo conceals the new rice boiler she has bought the very same day. It's beautifully understated and eloquent.

Ticking the clock of months and years going by are such occasions as the retirement of a coworker who agonizes over the prospect of having nothing to fill his life with. There's a project to lead a more fulfilling life somewhere else (Noé), but there's no such thing as moving out without hesitation. There's cause for celebration (with *35 shots of Rhum*) when the coworker goes into retirement. And there's death too, in the same railways that bear witness to no consequential event save for a drastic decision.

This is the essence (not very substantial, in principle) of Claire Denis' *35 Shots of Rhum*, and this is the message she so beautifully, silently conveys with this cinematic gem about life, inconsequential or not.