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MOVIES

'Elle': Cannes Review

3:36 AM PDT 5/21/2016 by Jordan Mintzer



Courtesy of Cannes Film Festival

THE BOTTOM LINE

A beautiful dark twisted French fantasy.



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Paul Verhoeven directs Isabelle Huppert in his first French-language feature, which premiered in competition in Cannes.

To say that *Elle* is Paul Verhoeven's classiest work to date is perhaps an overstatement, especially for a movie about a rape victim who gets her rocks off every time she comes face-to-face with her assailant. But we are after all dealing with the director behind such subversive classics as *Basic Instinct* and *Showgirls* — both of them powerful women's movies, despite what the naysayers may claim — so the bar in terms of sophistication and chic is not necessarily all that high.

Yet for his first feature film in 10 years, and his first one ever *en français*, the Dutch auteur has teamed up with the great Isabelle Huppert to craft a tastefully twisted mid-to-late-life crisis thriller that's both lasciviously dark and rebelliously light on its feet — a story about a 50-something woman who is dealt several blows over the course of a few months and fights back with authority, mockery and a fat can of pepper spray. It's as if Michael Haneke woke up one morning, took his funny pills and decided to make a sadistic French farce, and the result is a movie that will finally bring Verhoeven back into the spotlight after a decade-long absence.

Adapted with wit and efficiency by David Birke from Philippe Djian's novel, *Elle* hits the ground running — or rather, kicking and screaming — when video game executive Michele (Huppert) is attacked inside her stately outer-Paris home by a masked man. In a scene that we will flash back to several times, she's knocked on the floor, punched in the face and viciously raped in broad daylight, her screams of pain filling the room. Or is that pleasure?

As is typical of Verhoeven, it's hard to tell the difference between the two, and the rest of the movie will chronicle Michele's complex reaction to the assault, in a mix of fear, anger and arousal that has her rejecting any kind of victimization and gradually making the men around her prey to her own whimsies, whether sexual or otherwise.

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The male candidates — many of whom are suspects in the rape, keeping the suspense going for at least half the film's running time — include her way too spic-and-span neighbor, Patrick (Laurent Lafitte), whose marriage to a Catholic believer (Virginie Efira) provides fodder for plenty of anti-clerical broadsides; Richard (Charles Berling), a milquetoast ex who's trying to be something more than a washed-up novelist; Robert (Christian Berkel), Michele's part-time lover and the husband of her best friend and business partner, Anna (Anne Consigny); and Vincent (Jonas Bloquet), her 20-something son who works at the French equivalent of McDonald's and is about to have a child with a salty girlfriend, Josie (Alice Isaac).

They all sound like characters in a classic boulevard comedy by Georges Feydeau, and part of what makes *Elle* such an enjoyable affair is how well Verhoeven mines laughter out of so many deeply disturbing situations — whether it's a Christmas dinner where Michele plays footsie with Patrick under the table while causing her mother (Judith Magre) to have a stroke; or else an uproarious sequence where Josie gives birth to Vincent's son, only to toss the question of his paternity right in our faces.

Verhoeven displayed a knack for transgressive humor in early Dutch-language features like 1980's *Spetters*, and that strain continued throughout his work in Hollywood, whether in sci-fi actioners like *Robocop* and *Starship Troopers* or the aforementioned *Basic Instinct* and *Showgirls* — which, like *Elle*, are about women who grab life by the cojones (sometimes quite literally) and don't let go until they squeeze all they can out of it.

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brutal life-changing attack, with a sizeable grain of salt.

Such a feat wouldn't be possible without Huppert, who seems to be channeling characters she's played in a number of films — from Haneke's *The Piano Teacher* to Mia Hansen-Love's recent *Things to Come* — but does so with a gusto we've rarely seen while remaining very much herself. Only she could play a scene like the one where Michele faces a horny suitor with his pants down and slides a garbage pail between his legs, and look so carelessly elegant about it.

It's all quite perverse for sure, which of course is no surprise coming from either the actress or the director, though what's welcome about *Elle* is the way they combine their talents to make a film that hardly skimps on the sex, violence and sadism, yet ultimately tells a story about how one woman uses them all to set herself free.

Tech credits are polished in all departments, with DP Stephane Fontaine (*A Prophet*) bathing interiors in a warm natural glow and composer Anne Dudley providing a swooning, suspenseful score with echoes of Hitchcock and Polanski. Like many a Verhoeven outing, *Elle* offers its own devilish critique of the media — in this case the Mature 17+ video game created by Michele's company, and in whose sequences of computer-generated mutant rape she finds a way to channel her own depraved resistance. You go girl.

Cannes Film Festival 2016

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Venue: Cannes Film Festival (Competition)

Production companies: SBS Productions, Twenty Twenty Vision Filmproduktion, France 2 Cinema

Cast: Isabelle Huppert, Laurent Lafitte, Anne Consigny, Charles Berling, Virginie Efira

Director: Paul Verhoeven

Screenwriter: David Birke, based on the novel Oh... by Philippe Djian

Producers: Said Ben Said, Michel Merkt

Director of photography: Stephane Fontaine

Production designer: Laurent Ott

Costume designer: Nathalie Raoul

Editor: Job ter Burg

Composer: Anne Dudley

Casting director: Constance Demontoy

Sales agent: SBS International

In French

Not rated, 130 minutes

MOVIES

'The Grizzlies': Film Review | Palm Springs 2019

11:16 AM PST 1/9/2019 by Stephen Farber

