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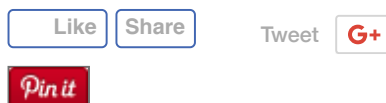


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## KINGS AND QUEEN

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By *Erica Abeel* ([Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93)) May 11, 2005



### Reviews

In his mercurial new film *Kings and Queen*, auteur Arnaud Desplechin (*My Sex Life...or How I Got into an Argument*, *Esther Kahn*) marshals a bold mix of melodrama and burlesque to tell the intertwined stories of Nora, an art-gallery director and single mother (Emmanuelle Devos), and her former husband Ismael (Mathieu Amalric), a disheveled, whacked-out musician. Clocking in at 150 minutes, the film rarely feels long. Its novelistic breadth, pitched intensity and on-the-fly shooting style pull the viewer smack-dab into the middle of these lives.

In alternating scenes, both principals are plunged into crises. Nora learns her novelist father is terminally ill and resolves to care for him in the family home in Grenoble. At the same time, she must protect her young son from harsh reality and contact her addict sister. Though she's now engaged to a well-heeled type, Nora's backstory reveals an aptitude for unsuitable romantic choices which continue to haunt her. And though she appears a dutiful and loving daughter, subsequent revelations suggest a darker side.

Injecting a jumpy humor, the excitable Ismael is committed kicking and screaming to a mental hospital, where his steely shrink is played by Catherine Deneuve. There he becomes involved with a suicidal inmate. And his antics include an in-house pharmacy raid with his drug-addicted lawyer. Only towards the film's end are the two principals brought together: Fearing for the future of her son, Nora tracks down Ismael in his institution and tries to persuade him to adopt the child.

DP Eric Gautier's camera keeps circling fetishistically back to the translucent skin, ample body and mysterious allure of Devos. She's like a moon pulling the story's tide. In gripping scenes, Devos also

conveys the emotional firestorm triggered by the death of a parent. As Desplechin says in the press notes, in Nora he tried to counter the "sweet sister" type in current cinema. She's a multifaceted heroine pounded by circumstance, who comes by a hard-won peace. Amalric seems a stand-in for the director at his most antic. Perhaps he personifies the wild creative demiurge, who must literally be straitjacketed for his own and society's good.

Most excitingly, Desplechin's cinema draws on narrative strategies ranging from novelistic flashbacks to conversations with the dead; to a shocking soliloquy from Nora's dead father; to black-and-white visualizations of Ismael's fantasies, as he recounts them to his analyst. The film stirs into the pot realism, burlesque and melodramatic excess, as well as mythic figures such as Leda and the Swan. It even plumbs the unconscious for its plot points, tapping into subterranean angers that viewers will surely recognize. A pity that its length and sheer wildness may scare off all but art-house devotees. For it's hard to think of another working director clothing his stories in such a grand and multi-dimensional manner.

-Erica Abeel

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