Acropolis Cinema and MUBI present
the Los Angeles premiere of

MRS. HYDE

By Serge Bozon
Starring Isabelle Huppert

June 27, 8:00pm
Downtown Independent
MRS. HYDE
95 min // France // 2018

The grand dame of the international art cinema, Isabelle Huppert, plays a double role in French auteur Serge Bozon’s rich, strange comic thriller, a very free reworking of Robert Louis Stevenson set in the Paris suburbs, with La Huppert as a physics professor bullied by students and colleagues, her routine of professional degradation interrupted when, after being struck by lightning, she acquires a powerful second persona that strikes fear into students and her stay-at-home husband.

A deadpan, atmospheric triumph from Bozon (Tip Top, La France), one of the most original talents in contemporary French cinema.

Strange Days: Serge Bozon’s “Madame Hyde”

Starring Isabelle Huppert, this gender-swapped, comedic riff of “The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” is a strange, ingenious film.

By Lawrence Garcia
This review was originally published in MUBI’s Notebook

Madame Hyde, Serge Bozon’s fifth directorial feature and second collaboration with Isabelle Huppert, is a strange film—ingenious, but modestly scaled; often bewildering, yet somehow always intuitively right; a mix of familiar narratives that nonetheless manages to feel startlingly original. Conceived by regular screenwriter Axelle Ropert as a gender-swapped, comedic riff on Robert Louis Stevenson’s 1886 science-fiction tale The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (familiar to audiences through its over 100 stage, radio and screen adaptations) fused with the suburban classroom drama (a genre familiar, especially, to the French), it’s a striking amalgam whose oddity may account for its Locarno Festival premiere, as opposed to a higher-profile film festival bow in Berlin, Cannes or Venice.

Then again, that’s entirely unsurprising for a film that vibrates at such a rarefied frequency, whose movements are frisky and flighty, and the pleasures of which could easily be mistaken for ineptitude.

The film opens with Huppert’s mousy, diminutive Marie Géquil (whose name marks the first of Madame Hyde’s three parts), a high school teacher at the Arthur Rimbaud Technical School in Garges-lès-Gonesse, a northern Parisian suburb. To call her ineffectual would be something of an understatement. Under inspection from the Ministry of National Education, barely tolerated by the school’s smarmy, brightly-dressed principal (Romain Duris), and altogether disrespected by her predominantly black and Arab students, Géquil is past the point of no return in her professional career and too weak-willed to force a change. And although glancingly limned, her domestic life with her house-husband Pierre (José Garcia, excellent in a minor role), while pleasant enough on the surface, isn’t much better. The scenes in the Géquilis’ quaint home are shrouded in conspicuous shadow, practically sepulchral in quality, evoking a kind of ineffable, incalculable distance and subterranean melancholy. While playing a plangent theme on a keyboard—a gesture that will be repeated later on—Pierre simply says: “Where is that delicate woman I married?” The statement quivers with years, even decades of unfulfilled expectation.

The remaining glimmer of potential, in all this, is Malik (Adda Senani), a physically disabled, disruptive, but intelligent student in whom Géquil takes an interest, but who remains drawn to the various dropouts of the surrounding estate, seeing in them an avenue for escape. “They make me dream,” he tells her in a rare moment of vulnerability. That’s a fairly maudlin, potentially self-important setup, freighted with racial and class tensions,
as well as the burden of institutional critique. But Madame Hyde does nothing if not upend expectations. Ropert’s script frequently finds oblique angles of approach to the problems at hand and locates illumination in the most unusual of places. Not in vain is Baudelaire’s Les Phares recited aloud at one point, then later offered as advice to a teaching trainee whose greatest fear is to become like Géquili, which is to say, a failure. “Find your beacon,” Géquili says, which is as succinct a statement as any on the pleasures and frustrations inherent in the transmission of knowledge.

The literal flash of inspiration, here, comes on the night of a harvest moon in the form of a freak lightning bolt that strikes Géquili in her makeshift laboratory. Instead of a malevolent personality, however, Marie Géquili’s Hyde is a being of pure energy, a sight that echoes the film’s opening credits, which alternate images of the technical school students with their photographic negatives. The transformation is a purposefully outlandish catalyst, the kind that goes against the laws of nature Géquili so assiduously communicates in her theoretical lectures on heat and electricity, but that’s perfectly suited to Bozon’s lively sensibilities. (“A woman of fire makes no sense,” she tells her students, when rumors of her twilight wanderings spread through the suburb.)

Over its intensely arrhythmic 95 minutes, Madame Hyde manages to evoke the sense of something that feels right, but whose full understanding lies just beyond articulation—the same feeling that Malik has when attempting a real-time proof of a Euclidean geometry problem posed by Mrs. Géquili. Much of that has to do with the distinctive look of the film. Shot by cinematographer Céline Bozon using old Fuji stock (which Serge Bozon prefers for its “non-shiny texture”) and predominantly composed with soft pastels, its images have a hazy quality, as if the elements in each frame could, at any moment, slip away and morph into something else: the shadow of a window-frame aligning with the triangles of a classroom; a pale sweater melding into a painted wall; faint light grading into darkness in the Géquis’ abode, where scenes take place exclusively in the evening, but which were, for logistical reasons, shot during the day (achieved by covering the garden with a square sheet, darkening the foreground and lightening the background in the process). The script’s provenance alone might be enough to figure out where the story ends up—a trajectory that manages to break down certain ideas of progress and get at, as Malik phrases it, the “essential... to be happy.” But its articulation of that essence—which progresses through professional triumph, marital uncertainty and a belated act of violence, the particulars of which are best left for discovery—is anything but straightforward. Much like the reductio ad absurdum proof that Géquili guides Malik through or the geometry problem that Malik helps a fellow student with, Bozon’s course of action seems to consist of revelatory detours that either circumvent or short-circuit typical avenues of thinking. In both cases, the solution is nothing more complex than an intuitive stroke of a line.

The prospect of a Jekyll and Hyde adaptation, predicated as it is on both duality and transformation—the two visual organizing principles of Madame Hyde—is something of a logical conclusion for Bozon, whose directorial efforts have had a recurring mutant strain. Think of Sylvie Testud’s androgynous figure in La France (2007), a film that fuses the war drama and musical; or the Internal Affairs duo of Tip Top (2013), a policier-comedy that methodically negotiates between poles of observation and action. There’s always a sense of unpredictability rooted in duality, the kind of wild shifts that Bozon terms “moments of rupture.” Often these take the form of musical or dance numbers, such as the rap sequence that Géquili/Hyde happens upon during one of her nocturnal jaunts. At other times, they might simply be a lingering focus on an exaggerated gesture, conspicuous turn of phrase or clever bit of wordplay.

Attention to such details is relatively uncommon in a contemporary arthouse landscape that seems to favor either bombastic monumentality, formal austerity or finely-toned subtlety, which may account for the relatively marginal status of Bozon’s cinema. But it’s entirely in keeping with the spirit of the equally unsung La lettre du cinéma circle—named after the French magazine with which Bozon and a number of other highly collaborative, multi-hyphenate critics-turned-filmmakers are associated—and whose films were the subject of a 2011 retrospective at the Film Society of Lincoln Center titled “Free Radicals: Serge Bozon and the New French Cinema”—the first North American survey of its kind. Programmed by Scott Foundas (whose accompanying article in the March/April issue of Film Comment was then, and perhaps still is, one of only a handful of published English-language articles on the La lettre circle), the lineup covered not just the work of Bozon and company,
but selections from the Diagonale group, so named for Paul Vecchiali’s production company, Les Films Diagonale, whose films were a major influence on the so-called New French Cinema.

In Dmitry Markov’s essential, thorough write-up of the 2011 survey, he outlines Bozon’s introductory remarks on Vecchiali’s Femmes Femmes (a particular touchstone for the La lettre directors), which noted that Vecchiali and his associates often struck a balance between the three filmic forces outlined by Diagonale director Jean-Claude Biette, namely: narrative, the formal project, and dramaturgy—but with narrative foregrounded. (That is, in contrast to the dramaturgical bent of directors such as Erick Zonca and Xavier Beauvois, or the formal projects of Bruno Dumont, Claire Denis and Gaspar Noé, among others.) The influence on Bozon’s own films is self-evident. Writing in the first issue of La lettre, Bozon even described Biette’s cinema as being “far away from Franco-French traditionalism, an area of freedom.” And what better way to describe the spirit that fueled Bozon and La lettre associate Pascale Bodet’s 10-day takeover of Paris’ Centre Pompidou in November 2010 to present Beaubourg, la dernière major! — a dizzying, revisionist history of French cinema presented “through the magnifying glass of craftsmanship,” with each day closed out by a musical set from none other than DJ Serge Bozon himself? (The exclamation mark feels entirely warranted.)

In that regard, Madame Hyde, with its ludic tendencies and pedagogical thrust, seems like the ideal container for the Diagonale tendencies: exemplary in its bridging of theory and practice, and in its encapsulation of the distinct pleasure of learning—an implicit, central fact of Bozon’s filmmaking, which is inextricable from both his written criticism and fundamental cinephilia. At its best, Madame Hyde is not “the sum of separate effects,” but as Géquil/ Hyde stresses in a mournful, discursive closing lecture: an unquantifiable interaction, an arena that triangulates between the three Biettian forces in order to discover, to clarify, and to create. Perhaps ingenuity, after all, is simply a matter of knowing where to draw the line.

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