

Brattle Theatre Film Notes: *Swimming Pool*

FR/UK, 2003. Unrated. 103 min
Cast: Charlotte Rampling, Ludivine Sagnier, Charles Dance, Marc Fayolle; Music: Philippe Rombi; Cinematographer: Yorick Le Saux; Producer: Olivier Delbosc, Marc Missonnier; Director: François Ozon

Surprise endings certainly aren't new to movies, but considering their overuse in the last ten or fifteen years, it sometimes feels that way. Beginning with *The Crying Game*, filmmakers of all stripes have shown an increasing fondness for the twist, holding back single, crucial details until the final scene, solving the mystery with a perverse revelation or altering the meaning of everything that has come before by turning the tables on the viewer's perceptions. Of course, there's nothing wrong with the surprise ending per se, but like any other convention it is, in the hands of a hack, a cheap and infuriating tactic. Recent examples abound: last year's idiotic *Identity*, the shallow and juvenile *Fight Club*, any of M. Night Shyamalan's half-baked contrivances. At their worst, twist movies feel as though the twist is the whole point. One can imagine a screenwriter conceiving of a surprise ending and, dizzy with his own cleverness, building the entire story around it. In these kinds of films, the characters, sets, locations and everything else are just props, hollow and perfunctory, as the story hurries along to its amazing, brilliant gimmick.

Happily, there are still some exceptions to this disheartening rule, and none better than François Ozon's *Swimming Pool*. The peerless Charlotte Rampling plays Sarah Morton, a sour, introverted mystery novelist burned out by her dreary life caring for her elderly father, and in need of some creative recharging. Her longtime editor John (Dance) offers the use of his house in the south of France (where Rampling

saw her life begin to unravel in Ozon's luminescent *Under the Sand*), and she accepts after some hesitation, trading bleak London for sun-washed Avignon. What John fails to mention is his daughter, Julie, who shows up unannounced late one night, tosses down her knapsack and takes up residence in a spare room. Julie, much to Sarah's dismay, is the very picture of French sexual liberation, a nubile, loose-limbed young blond more interested in loud, drunken sex with the numerous men she picks up at a local tavern than with picking up her dinner dishes or getting to bed at a decent hour.

In one of the film's many clever asides, Julie and Sarah are like dueling stereotypes of the French and the English, respectively. Julie,



the rude, loud and self-concerned tramp, waltzes about topless, smokes pot in the living room and sneers down her nose at Sarah's disapproval. Sarah, as the by the book repressed Englishwoman, watches Julie's shenanigans with a combination of horrified revulsion and undeniable interest. But Sarah is no simple prude as we come to realize. The trim, subdued Rampling, whose lustrous sexuality is undimmed even as she approaches 60, is perfectly cast as a woman out of touch with herself in many ways. Though perhaps unable to match Julie's wanton sex appeal, she is beguiling, more puzzling the more we know about her.

And Ozon, demonstrating what sets the good twist movie apart from the bad, has written for Rampling a vivid, complex character. Clearly the product of a life of seclusion and emotional inwardness, she is a mass of quirks and ticks. Watch, for example, how she eats. She approaches food with desperation and abandon, suggesting not only a person who has spent a lifetime eating alone, but also one whose needs are rarely given vent. And soon we realize it isn't just food. In her childish demands for John's attention, her coy flirtations with the waiter at a local restaurant, and her surreptitious pilfering of Julie's wine we begin to realize there is quite another person bubbling beneath the surface. Julie, too, begins to reveal some unexpected complexities, opening up to Sarah about John's failings as a father. By the time Sarah seduces a late-middle-aged gardener, we wonder if the two have more in common than we realized.

But for all the subtlety of its characterizations, *Swimming Pool* is no heart-felt drama. The tone is not one of emotional discovery or playful, serial-comic learning about other people's differences. Sarah and Julie are both hard people, devoted to their own limitations. Before long their truce falls apart, and the movie begins to resemble one of Sarah's whodunits, with scattered clues, missing bodies and secretly dug graves in the garden. But the time spent exploring these two people has not been wasted, and it has not been a red herring. Ozon here demonstrates what so many directors seem incapable of understanding: that character- and plot-driven stories are not mutually exclusive, and that attention to one enriches the other. By the time the twist comes along, it is not merely a clever maneuver, but has the force of logic and emotional sense.

- Written by Lawrence Fahey