

A Woman's Life (Une Vie) [12] 2017|Bel/Fr|119 min

UK release date	12th January 2018
Director	Stéphane Brizé
Screenplay	Stéphane Brizé, Florence Vignon
Cinematographer	Antoine Héberlé
Cast	Judith Chemla (Jeanne Le Perthuis des Vauds); Jean-Pierre Darroussin (Le Baron Simon-Jacques Le Perthuis des Vauds); Yolande Moreau (La Baronne Adélaïde Le Perthuis des Vauds); Swann Arlaud (Julien de Lamarre); Nina Meurisse (Rosalie)

“A Woman’s Life”, based on the novel “Une Vie” by Guy de Maupassant, traces the fluctuating fortunes of Jeanne Le Perthuis des Vauds (Judith Chemla), an aristocratic landowner in 19th-century France, through marriage and motherhood.

In some ways, the movie is a striking departure from Mr. Brizé’s previous feature, “The Measure of a Man,” which starred Vincent Lindon as a displaced worker buffeted by the disruptions of 21st-century capitalism. But in spite of their obvious differences of gender, class and period, the two protagonists share a common plight, and Mr. Brizé’s interest in them is rigorously consistent. He is concerned, above all, with individual dignity, and the forces that conspire to undermine it.

In Jeanne’s case, those forces are, in a word, men. Not all men: Her father is a kind patriarch, and the early part of “A Woman’s Life” unfolds in a pastoral paradise of parental affection and abundant leisure. Surrounded by sunlight, flowers and gentle breezes, Jeanne dwells in a vision of happiness. The arrival of a handsome suitor (Swann Arlaud) followed by a healthy baby seems to promise a deeper bliss, but things don’t quite work out that way.

It would be wrong to say too much about the heartbreak that Jeanne endures, though none of it is altogether surprising. Straying husbands and feckless sons are hardly uncommon in literature or in life, but such knowledge would hardly be much consolation for any specific wife or mother. And the power of Mr.

Brizé's film — and of Ms. Chemla's quietly volcanic performance — lies partly in the way ordinary disasters erupt in Jeanne's life, at once challenging her passivity and emphasizing her helplessness.

The pathos and wonder of "A Woman's Life" comes from its recognition that Jeanne is at once a captive of cruel circumstances and a willful, intelligent human being. Her kinship with other 19th-century fictional heroines — Emma Bovary, Jane Eyre, Anna Karenina — is evident. She suffers, but she also reads, thinks and desires, and strives to find a zone of freedom within boundaries dictated by fate and society.

There are a few dramatic incidents, including outbreaks of emotional and physical violence, but the real action in the film is interior, and Mr. Brizé's greatest skill is his ability to imply the deep and complicated emotions beneath the placid, decorous surface of Jeanne. "A Woman's Life," like "The Measure of a Man," moves calmly and deliberately, but it never feels slow. Instead, its images and scenes are suffused by an intensity that seems almost to be a quality of the light and air as they play across Ms. Chemla's watchful, sometimes inscrutable features.

One name for that elusive quality might be empathy, but it might be something even simpler. The attention that this film gives to its main character — and requires of its viewer — seems perfectly proportionate. A life is a small thing, and only one thing. But it's also everything.

After **A.O. Scott**, May 4 2017, New York Times

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