



A tale of Autumn

Director: Eric Rohmer
Country: France
Date: 1998

A review by Stephen Holden for the *New York Times*:

One way to look at the films of Eric Rohmer, in which assorted combinations of attractive, cultivated Europeans rearrange their lives amid much exquisitely verbalized soul-searching, is to see them as sophisticated fairy tales.

Shakespearean comedies for the modern professional class, they presuppose a highly civilized code of behavior and advanced educational level that in a Rohmer film could be taken as universal givens. Despite whatever blows fate may deliver the characters, a divine plan usually emerges that overrides earlier setbacks.

Rational decision-making pays off, as does trusting one's deepest intuitions. True love -- or the closest thing to it that one can find in this life -- is the ultimate reward, but it can't be tasted until every moral quandary has been aired and resolved.

"A Tale of Autumn," the final chapter in the director's "Tales of the Four Seasons," is as sublimely warming an experience as the autumn sun that shines benevolently on the vineyard owned by the film's central character, Magali (Beatrice Romond).

A wiry, vital woman in her mid-40s with snapping eyes and an unruly bush of hair, Magali, a widowed mother of two grown children, is content with her life except for one thing. When prodded by her married best friend, Isabelle (Marie Riviere), Magali admits that she longs for a relationship with the right man but believes it is too late for her to find love.

Magali brings all the usual arguments to rationalize her resignation. Potentially eligible partners would all want younger women, she insists. And living in the country (in the gorgeous Rhone Valley region of southern France), she is also isolated. When Isabelle suggests placing a personal ad, Magali is revolted by the idea.

"A Tale of Autumn" follows the confusions that ensue when two of Magali's friends decide to play matchmaker. Isabelle places a personal ad in Magali's behalf, and when a courtly, eminently suitable salesman named Gerald (Alain Libolt) responds, she interviews him extensively before revealing that she is a merely acting as an unbidden liaison to someone else.

Meanwhile, Magali's son's girlfriend, Rosine (Alexia Portal), whom Magali has taken under her wing, proposes to fix the older woman up with her ex-lover and former professor, Etienne (Didier Sandre).

Both prospective partners are coaxed into attending the wedding of Isabelle's daughter. The complications that follow at the outdoor reception might be described as Rohmer's elegantly psychologized and sublimated version of a classic French farce.

It isn't the story but the telling that makes "A Tale of Autumn" such a rich, emotionally satisfying experience. As the five main characters reveal their fantasies and fears, each emerges as an astoundingly complex and fully rounded human being. By the end of the film, Ms. Romond's Magali, an earthy, high-

strung woman with an arrogance that masks an underlying shyness, has come so alive that you almost see her as a old friend.

The film's plot, like that of other Rohmer films, is mathematically schematic. Even before the equation has been balanced, except for a twist here and there, you know where the story will go. But the characters' depth, humanity and likability make the expected payoff feel earned.

"A Tale of Autumn" has its labored moments. Especially when the talk turns to grapes and late vintages, it is pressing an obvious metaphor a bit too aggressively. But the movie evokes such a sensuous atmosphere -- bird song, wind, and light and shadow that delineate the season and time of day with an astonishing precision -- that you are all but transported into Magali's fields, where this year's grapes promise to yield an especially fine vintage.

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