

SLIGHTLY AMAZING: JACQUES DEMY'S *A SLIGHTLY PREGNANT MAN*

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Hard on the heels of those little ratties, is another incarnation of the Plague which comes packaged in an extraordinary variant of “sweetness and light.” Let’s take a close look at the title and credits to get off on the right foot here. *L’événement le plus important depuis que l’homme a marché sur la lune* (*The Most Important Event since Man Walked on the Moon*), a.k.a. *A Slightly Pregnant Man* (1973) compares, supposedly tongue-in-cheek, its bid with that “small step, giant [great] leap” triumph of the classical rationalism of natural science and its technology. Accompanying that rhetorical juxtaposition are shots of the celebrated moon walk of 1969, where an astronaut lurches about in a bulky protective suit making him look like an albino hippo on its hind legs. This is not a good way to look with a dynamics scrutineer like Demy on hand. He immediately turns the screw by opening with a Mike and Christina moment. There is a couple in a car, Marco, a driving instructor being close to the boiling point with his student, Mlle. Janvier (in a *blue* overcoat and actually wearing other clothes as well), an elderly novice and errant handler of the gear shift and turning signals. The car stalls more than once. Something about Marco’s voice (coming from that multi-skilled comedian, Marcello Mastroianni, all rumbling vowels, and his dazed attitude, makes us think of M. Hulot and his rattle trap. He bears no resemblance at all to Mike Hammer, but right at this point you know he gets some kind of pass.

Still requiring a salient historical linchpin of noir-primed metaphor—we’re all headed for “something big” here—the narrative invokes *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* in having the car-guy headed for a date with his “fiancée”/wife of about eight years, Irène, played by—who else?—Catherine Deneuve, more lovely than ever, as owner of a hairdressing salon and still in love with hyper-rich decor and attire. She has a physical presence capable of derailing all entanglements of plot (something of an antithesis to Brecht’s “alienation effect”), and Demy clearly cherishes her for it. He’s got tickets for a show by chanteuse, Mireille Mathieu whom we first see on their TV giving the kind of breathless interview Lola might have mustered if she’d had the talent to get that far. The theatre and curtains, all in cherry red, come to life when a girl, several times more wound-up than even Delphine and Solange were, blurts out her intro, “Our heart is young/Our songs are new/Our voices are sung in a style of *blue*!” (Irène maintains an almost solemn countenance here. Later we encounter a “Solange” doing corporate secretary duties.) Mlle. Mathieu comes out swinging, with a Lola-like, desperate intensity, on a tune about *Paris*, that tinsel and grave Mecca in the eyes of the *Demoiselles*. The composition lays emphasis on the storied hotbed of audacity, Montparnasse, where Marco and Irène have set up their businesses. Soon into her song, Marco excuses himself feeling unwell. On returning from the washroom and still being sick, he precipitates their all abandoning the show, turning their backs on its high-octane poetry, however nostalgic.

Irène, trying to fight back a Geneviève-like hysteria about, “Something always ruins it!” insists he see her family doctor, and Marco demurs in view of all such entities being “quacks,” and anxiety that “once they get their hands on you...” He shows up anyway, at the office of the “general practitioner,” “Dr. Delavigne” (as in *être dans les vignes du Seigneur*, “to be in one’s cups”). Micheline Presle’s parading the aura of Jackie in this role is the high-water mark of Demy’s comedic lexicon. Locked into a facade of convivial confidence, dressed, as always, for the cocktail hour, with eye and machinery-catching bracelets, and, when things get complex, using a long cigarette holder, she clears away Marco’s Hulot-like befuddled mumbling-- about the specifics of his “marriage” and having begun with Irène while still married to another woman—with that little conspiratorial smile so true to Moreau, and Jackie’s flipped-up enunciation, “...*histoire classique*.” Then, at the examination table, she evinces Jackie’s fearlessness about plunging her blue chips in hopes of breaking the bank. Apropos of his bloated belly she chirps, in the aura of “voluble/versatile,” “You’re ballooning...you’re blossoming!” No more provoked to thought than if someone had dropped a tray of champagne glasses, she cheerily informs him he’s four months pregnant (a reading, like that of his blood pressure, “sound as money in the bank”) and calls up her trusty gynaecologist-resource, who greets her with, “How’s the old orgasm?” “*Très bien*” she smiles, as if meeting an old beau at a party.

After going through a brief shock and then a spate of betrayed anger, Irène comes around, like the Princess in *Peau d’Ane* (but without war-veteran, Delphine Syrig, to keep her from making a big mistake). At the specialist’s the next day, accompanied by Dr. Delavigne, getting into her generalist stride, they are both reassured by the Professor’s ready scientific explanation for the unusual turn of events. There has been, it seems to him, a “hormonal imbalance” due to environmental pollution as affecting food. “Modern man is his own worst enemy.” Be that as it may, Irène wonders if there should be an x-ray and is cut off with “That would harm the baby.” Her family doctor

relishes the “revolutionary” social consequences attendant on her academic crony’s prediction that millions of men in Marco’s condition would soon have to be reckoned with.

Hence begins a media frenzy and a subsequent windfall involving Marco modelling in ads for a manufacturer of maternity wear, branching out to paternity wear. (At one stage of the latter exercise, Marco, with the firm’s executive secretary, Solange, in attendance, poses for publicity shots in his loose-fitting, blue-denim *ouvrier* attire, mood music, not far removed from that of Andy’s protégé, filling the air.)

Thus installed in a pantheon of celebrity, and dovetailing with a well-advanced sensitivity protocol—buttressed by the imprimatur of an International Congress of Medicine—Marco and Irène glide through social intersections that you might have expected to produce some pain. Their little boy (who had just completed ridding himself of the sham of the “Tooth Fairy”), on learning of the “roles transference,” admits to puzzlement about the route of the “seed,” but soon falls in line with the “new system,” his with-it clothes, haircut and demeanor implying he’s cool with this because it’s cool. During a segment of the TV program, “Person of the Week,” Dr. Delavigne, perhaps due to a fondness for escargots, or maybe because she read something, muses that the new system puts us in league with “snails,” and is curtly contradicted by the Professor. Irène fields—in a flash—a question from the Moderator about how this affects sexual politics, with the handy sound-bite, “It will finally bring men up to equality with women.” Lesbian and gay men acquaintances, clients and denizens of the quartier find in the new regime golden opportunities for making the world more gratifying to them.

But it is in the circle of friends, co-workers, clients and casual contacts that Marco and Irène ignite engagements exuding the interpersonal sunniness of special interest to this work. The speed of assimilating the edginess receives its definitive confirmation when Marco refers to dealing with the “situation” (meaning getting officially married), and Irène asks, “What situation?” The morning the situation hits the press is a busy one in the beauty salon, and a copy of the newspaper is quickly passed around. The ladies’ first response is discreet ribaldry, and on reading Marco’s name they look to Irène with some curiosity but no malice. She acknowledges the situation as if it were a minor lottery win, but with socially apt domestic solicitude. The girls rise to the occasion, asking good questions and making workable observations, as if they were in a seminar for some Honors program. Irène fits in well with the grievances about abortion services and the Pope. (Only an elderly misfit on hand, Mlle. St. Claire—recalling the bar-café owner in *Lola*—does not get onside, recalling once again the skeptical researcher with her goat in Tati’s *Jour de Fête*.) The tenor at Marco’s bar-hangout near his driving school is understandably more earthy (one of the pinball games is called *Long John*), but he is treated with no less kindness than Irène. This being Montparnasse, there would be no mockery along the lines of “Monsieur Dame.” A woman, not noticeably drunk, infers that a man having a baby is “no weirder” than a woman having a baby. Marco is only slightly nonplussed, due to having to drink nothing stronger than water. There is a register of breezy warmth (virtually) everyone in sight masters, and this (in a manner akin to the creepiness of *The Pied Piper*) is the innermost content of *A Slightly Pregnant Man*. Soon after the appointments, Marco draws Irène’s attention to his no longer being able to button the waist of his pants. This is done with a kind of quiet sufferance Tati’s François, the thoroughly modern mailman, would present and it exudes a similar scruffiness. Irène, every millimetre turned out resplendently, gently takes him through the idea of custom-made trousers and using suspenders. The thunderous incongruity of their appearance, alertness and prospects cannot tarnish in the slightest their instinctive mutual respect and its thrum of gentleness, in some way linked to love.

Frequently visible from Marco’s bar is a movie house marquee advertising a version of Frankenstein. The happy couple, he now renowned as “*l’homme de demain*” (“man of the future”), find an upgrade for their businesses and home, she enthusing, “*C’est vast! C’est très vast!*” (At the same time, running to answer the phone, in a raincoat and porkpie hat, the real estate agent conjures the accident-prone protagonist of Tati’s *Mon Oncle*.) It all comes crashing down at the “seven month x-ray.” “To err is human and regrettable,” the Specialist observes. But what holds fast is the web of contrivance, so attractively maintained. Marco’s sweetly sardonic partner remarks, “The world’s turned upside down,” and thereby puts into the open the physics from which a compromised liberality not only quells its terror but also tests the vitality of a new terrain. Conventionalities with their retainers on poetic depth, thoroughly discredited—the moon become a quasi-industrial desert on which to stage slapstick circuses—the exigency of poetry makes itself known by unconventional routes—smashing clothes, smashing hair, and being on the cusp of sensational change (“revolution”)—suitably tempered. Marco’s promising indisposition (a spinout from Pandora’s Box) comes to be replicated all over the globe, as explained by the Specialist as “mass psychosis.” It could also have been named a “plague.”

Demy puts in motion a topspin of sunny bounce (far more graceful than the moon walk) accruing to capitulation to the distortions wrought by actions on behalf of well-being, material and social. Whereas the glorious sparks evident in *Les Demoiselles* were short-lived and not apt for development, those cool embers on display in *A Slightly Pregnant Man* introduce a far more complex historical reflection. With all its baggage, Montparnasse was not the place for kicking over the traces, but instead for piecing traces together. Demy’s scenario discloses that such an

enterprise functions as a subtly oppressive force on behalf of a comfortably equivocal oblivion. On being brought down to earth, Irène uses the phrase, “the village idiots” to cover their new look. Nothing like a village to bring off extortive correctness. The dynamic at the heart of that audacity, as combined with a self-sparing compact, makes it particularly susceptible to misplaying matters of inertial physicality, sexual matters being a prominent component. (Another quite fascinating misplay, speaking to the clannishness of that gentle weave, is Marco’s having no qualms about cruelly needling Mlle. Janvier, clearly not in on the smooth glide alluded to by the song, “*Mon Paris*.”) More basic and no less important are the intimations about cowardice at the heart of such expediency. Irène acknowledges, to the curmudgeon-customer who berates her for sustaining the idea of the Tooth Fairy, “I haven’t quite grown up yet.” She and Marco are fed a steady diet of chicken by the no-nonsense housekeeper. Their “baby” never “moves.” Irène’s clothes (though, of course, she looks fabulous in them) are designed in a child’s mode. The Specialist goes on in such a way as to inadvertently illuminate their shortcomings. “Is there a person who goes through a day without fear? You’ll be better for having been creative.”

But the spectacle of a broad historical territory in clandestine and loving research—cheap and farcical outcomes not precluded—would have introduced another dimension to Demy’s take on the deadly kiss of originary dynamics. The compound of that “Paris” so awkwardly belted out near the beginning bespeaks a truly “vast” problematic, to be inhabited not only by Demy but by those members of his audience ready to take him seriously.