

Céline et Julie vont en Bateau

(France, 1974)

Director: Jacques Rivette

Label: BFI (UK)

Region: 2 (PAL)

Discs: 2

ENGLISH TITLE: *Céline and Julie Go Boating*

THE FILM

Rivette may be the most elusive of all the French New Wave directors. At once baffling and utterly absorbing, his sprawling feature films are epic in both complexity and duration, with stories that resist genre classification. A primary concern has been the role of the viewer, and Rivette's use of narrative to explore our relationship with both cinema and the world we inhabit is nothing short of visionary. His films are long with purpose, expressive of his belief that movies should activate us, rather than pacify us, challenging us to think for ourselves.

Céline and Julie is his most joyful work. A collaboration with screenwriter Eduardo de Gregorio and its stars Juliet Berto and Dominique Fournier, it follows the adventures of two best friends who meet after a playful chase on foot through the streets of Paris. They come upon a mansion where an ominous melodrama is perpetually unfolding: two well-manicured women (Bulle Ogier and Marie-France Pisier) vie for the affections of a wealthy creep (Barbet Schroeder, the film's producer) and his daughter, who, it becomes clear, is in imminent danger. The story-within-a-story is conveyed in fragments, as Céline and Julie travel between its world and theirs through the power of magical candies.

The film's use of theatre and performance is signature Rivette; critic David Thomson remarked that, in its dissolution of the boundary between reality and imagination, *Céline and Julie* is 'the most innovative film since *Citizen Kane*'. The charming pairing of Julie, a mischievous librarian fixated on witchcraft, with the impetuous Céline, a magician and compulsive storyteller, echoes *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes'* Monroe and Russell (Rivette was an early Hawks champion), but their unapologetic autonomy firmly situates the film in the heyday of feminism. *Céline and Julie* is a pleasure to watch, both a playful narrative escapade and an exhortation to an enlightened kind of spectatorship.

THE DISCS

Benefiting from the film's 2006 restoration, the BFI's transfer is very clean and true to the low-contrast colours of the original. Extras on the second disc include Jonathan Romney's 18-minute introduction to Rivette's cinema and informative discussion of *C&J*. A two-minute short, RW Paul's silent *The Haunted Curiosity Shop* (1901), echoes the spirit of the film, and a special bonus is Alain Resnais's rare, masterful short *Toute la mémoire du monde* (1956), a documentary essay on the old National Library of France. The booklet includes colour photos and interviews with Labourier, Berto and Rivette, as well as words by the late Tom Milne and Susan Seidelman, who cites Rivette's influence on *Desperately Seeking Susan*. (VERA BRUNNER-SUNG)