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'Max & Lenny': Film Review

11:21 AM PDT 3/16/2015 by Boyd van Hoeij



Courtesy of Shellac

The Bottom Line Despite structural and tonal problems, two winning performances deliver the necessary heart and grit.

Cast Camelia Pand'Or, Jisca Kalvanda, Adam Hegazy

Director Fred Nicolas

Newcomer Fred Nicolas's first film was co-written by Francois Begaudeau, the star and co-writer of Palme d'Or winner and Oscar nominee "The Class"

Two girls from the wrong side of the Marseilles tracks strike up an unexpected -- and unexpectedly intense -- friendship in *Max & Lenny*, the feature debut of French director **Fred Nicolas**. Co-authored by novelist and screenwriter **Francois Bégaudeau**, who wrote and starred in **Laurent Cantet's** Cannes Palme d'Or winner and Oscar-nominated *The Class*, this is that rare story about the immigrant experience that's told from an exclusively female and adolescent point of view. Strong performances and an appropriately gritty assembly compensate for the film's structural and tonal problems and an occasionally grating tendency to suggest that these two women can be their own men, so to speak. This socio-politically charged drama, served up with a generous helping of French-language rap music, is sturdy festival material, with some offshore theatrical sales possible though VOD pickups more likely.

In the film's opening sequence, Lenny (**Camelia Pand'Or**) is followed by cinematographer **Sébastien Buchmann**, actress-director **Valerie Donzelli's** regular d.p., as she walks down the street as seen from behind, with the rapid succession of close-ups making it impossible to tell whether the person in the red tracksuit is a man or a woman until Buchmann finally shows a full-length figure. Like the male-sounding names of the protagonists, it feels like a somewhat mannered affectation that's been imposed on material that's strongest when it sticks to its own brand of nitty-gritty, almost documentary-like realism, free of artificial restraints meant to impose any kind of direct meaning or message.

Lenny, of North African origin, is headed for a quiet spot at an abandoned construction site in the rough Consolat neighborhood, North of Marseilles, so she can practice her rapping and dancing skills without

disturbing her older and very busy dealer brother (**Adam Hegazy**), with whom she shares a Spartan apartment in the projects. While singing, Lenny realizes she's been spied upon by an unknown in the dark, though the stranger, the kind Max or Maxine (**Jisca Kalvanda**), from Congo, tells the talented Lenny to keep going as if nothing happened.

It turns out to be the beginning of a beautiful friendship, with Max and Lenny, a first and second-generation immigrant, respectively, really getting to know each other during a bout of night-time reverse slumming as they break into a villa's garden and splash around in its pool, joking about the risk of being infected by "rich-people bacteria". It is in relaxed, semi-improvised feeling scenes such as these that the material really shines, as the socio-political and economic gap between rich and poor, locals and immigrants and France's haves and have-nots are suggested naturally and without ever feeling like a lecture (much like in Bégaudeau's *The Class*, which depicted a group of students at a multicultural Parisian banlieue school as a microcosm of French society).

Pand'Or and Kalvanda also have terrific chemistry, which at times almost threatens to become a liability, as some amorous-feeling tension occasionally creeps into their interactions — "You're the most important thing life has given me," one of the girls confesses at one point — though the film never delivers on that promise or indeed any suggestion of romance with anyone of either sex. The screenplay, co-written by the director and Bégaudeau, thus needs other sources of tension to keep the story going, including, in one of the film's most lovingly detailed choices, Max's daily struggle to simply look after her ailing grandmother and band of little brothers while she's waiting for her immigration status to be sorted out.

However, some of Lenny's problems with her family members, especially one that makes her decide to break into a building at night, could have benefited from clearer backstories and psychological motivations. But Lenny, who pours a lot of herself into her rap songs, otherwise isn't much of a talker, which doesn't really help. However, it is clear she's an instinctive and often reckless person who's got her heart in the right place, which results in a winning if also slightly surreal-feeling mid-film getaway to an island off the coast of Marseilles, where Max forces Lenny to finally live up to her talents.

Refreshingly, and unlike films such as **Karim Dridri's** *Bye Bye* or **Erick Zonca's** *The Little Thief*, on which Nicolas worked as an assistant director, crime is not at the center of the lives of these marginalized Marseilles protagonists, though the few instances the film touches on it don't feel entirely organic either. A subplot concerning two shady characters that follow Lenny around is not well integrated and lacks details, while an instance of shoplifting plays like a bad combination of plot convenience and out-of-character behavior. Also somewhat problematic is the film's final stretch, which tries to shoehorn the ugly realities of immigrant life and an empowering/wish-fulfillment message about following your dreams into one dual, bittersweet ending for which Nicolas struggles to find the right tone.

Kalvanda, whose cool poise is constantly contrasted by her expressive eyes, is the real revelation here, though the spunky Pand'Or, whose character was inspired by Argentinian-French rapper **Keny Arkana**, also impresses. The latter also does her own singing and wrote her character's own lyrics, which are spiced up by composer **Simon Neel** with a mix of hip-hop beats and excerpts from classical standards from Mozart, among others.

Production companies: Chaz Productions, Film Factory, Sedna Films, Solaire Production, Indefilms

Cast: Camélia Pand'Or, Jisca Kalvanda, Adam Hegazy, Alvie Bitemo Mamounga, Norbert Godji, Cathy Ruiz, Martial Bezot, Manelle Tighilt, Bouchta Saidoun, Mathieu Fascella, Nouri Seif-Eddine, Mathieu Demy, Pierre Salvadori

Director: Fred Nicolas

Screenplay: Fred Nicolas, Francois Bégaudeau

Producer: Elisabeth Perez

Director of photography: Sebastien Buchmann

Production designer: Olivia Tournadre, Mourad Saidi

Costume designer: Janina Ryba

Editor: Mike Fromentin, Gilda Fine

Music: Simon Neel, Camelia Pand'Or

Casting: Eve Guillou, Cendrine Lapuyade, Boris Vassalo, Bania Medjbar, Julie Bonan

Sales: Alpha Violet

No rating, 85 minutes
