

FRENCH DUCK FILM FESTIVAL

MANDARIN DUCK EDITION 2023



DETAILED REVIEW

THE FIRST NIGHT

BY

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WRITING

This is an adaptation of Luigi Pirandello's short story, "Prima notte," which runs 32 pages, condensed into a 20-minute film. The original story was first published in 1900. Choosing a contemporary adaptation indicates a desire to draw parallels between the two time periods, exploring themes of marriage, rural life, grief, and poverty. This suggests a deliberate approach: not much has changed over a century.

The synopsis presents the film as a tragicomedy, but the adaptation leans more towards a television soap opera; the stakes are condensed and presented to the audience through the characters, giving the dialogues an informative quality. The comedy does not shine through in the film, as the acting style tends towards a dramatic treatment of the narrative. The music and shot selection emphasize this "pathos" tone (not necessarily negative, as it's an artistic choice).

The dramatic structure of the text implies an inherent fate, which the audience can sense from the beginning of the film. The intention is not to "surprise" the viewer but rather to paint a portrait of an era, a region, with elements of dreaminess both in the text and visuals. While dreamlike elements are evident in certain shots, particularly in exposition and silent scenes, they are lacking in the acted and spoken sequences.

The parallel between 1900 and today suffers due to this narrative structure. The fatalistic aspect present in 1900—where the world is more enclosed, making it difficult to imagine the young woman simply leaving for the city, as is often the case in rural areas when things become constrained—doesn't directly translate to the chosen contemporary setting. Without knowing the specific Czech context, the parallel with an island like Sicily in Pirandello's original work makes the narrative structure less fitting and credible. The insularity and time period are crucial factors that lend credibility to Pirandello's story but cannot be directly applied to the chosen context in the film. Certain writing choices seem puzzling to the viewer, particularly regarding the approach to marriage. The future bride's mother seems easily convinced, which comes across as less credible. Similarly, the young woman's quick acceptance of the marriage feels abrupt and lacks development.

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DIRECTION

The mise-en-scène is generally successful, employing an aesthetic that tends to confine the viewer within a relatively closed space, where characters live in an unchanging cycle of habit. Each seems burdened by various fates that cannot be resolved on their own.

However, the necessary comedic tone to avoid falling into a pit of misery regarding grief, isolation, and the weight of debts is not entirely achieved. The impression of characters condemned to lives of resignation keeps the viewer at a distance, making it difficult to identify with them. The use of music and certain shots intensifies this sense of misery even further.

The highly informative dialogues, which do not align with contemporary language, considerably weigh down the performances of the actors. They appear more engaged with the text than with the situation and action, resulting in somewhat monochromatic and predictable performances. Instead of the expected sensitivity displayed through the camera's perspective, the actors become almost like narrators, making their personal struggles less credible and compelling. The focus shifts more towards the theme and underlying reasons of the story rather than the characters, their emotions, and dilemmas.

Consequently, the level of the actors varies, being sometimes good and at other times a bit lacking, depending on the characters and situations.

The violin and double bass sequence in the woods raises questions about its narrative relevance. While visually beautiful, it reinforces the sense of misery, as the musical composition and direction add to the overall tone.

The sequence where the two future spouses meet takes us out of the realistic universe we are immersed in, as the physical dynamics do not seem to correspond to the situation.

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CINEMATOGRAPHY

The cinematography demonstrates a solid execution, focusing more on the dreamlike dimension rather than the dynamic required for a comedy. It brings a sense of everyday life to the drama it portrays. The shots are generally simple and convey the ambiance of a village where everything feels enclosed.

However, there were moments when the cinematography could have been more meticulously crafted, both in terms of the exposition shots, which felt somewhat predictable, and the color grading.

OTHERS

The sound work is generally of high quality. However, the exposition music, for instance, could have been more personalized. It tends to give the impression of a television series, while the film carries a more intense dramatic impact. The editing, although generally coherent, is somewhat slow, accentuating the story's contemplative and melancholic dimension.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The main challenge lies in adapting a work from the early 20th century, whether in the treatment of the subjects it addresses or in the form it takes. While the trap of an adaptation too faithful to the text seems to have been avoided, it appears that more freedom and a more personal touch could have been embraced. Particularly, the language and its comedic essence could have been integrated into an almost parodic dimension, or conversely, it could have been judicious to give the dialogues a thoroughly contemporary flair, making them less explanatory and more spontaneous to lighten the performances and facilitate an organic character portrayal.

It could have been advantageous to work with a more distinct rhythm to emphasize the comedy conveyed by the text, allowing for more focus on emotionally powerful sequences. The actors and direction would have benefited from exploring greater variations and precision on both registers.