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# To Catch a Thief

**T**he agony and the ecstasy of making a movie isn't the freshest croissant in the café but Olivier Assayas's *Irma Vep* sure makes it seem so. This latest feature by the 42-year-old festival-god was shot, in Super 16, like an on-set documentary—at once self-deprecating and megalomaniacal, it's a jagged, speedy rap fueled by cigarettes, coffee, and insomnia.

A wry and witty piece of work, *Irma Vep* puts business first, holds the art for last, and keeps stardom at center screen. Hong Kong action diva Maggie Cheung descends, straight from a 12-hour flight, into a churning maelstrom of production-assistant hysteria. Cheung, known as Maggie and essentially playing herself, has arrived in Paris to take the title role of the black-clad cat burglar Irma Vep in a remake of Louis Feuillade's 1915 serial, *Les Vampires*. The original cult film, a baroquely paranoid tale of criminal conspiracy, is to be updated, with some trepidation, by René Vidal, a burnt-out new wave auteur (Jean-Pierre Léaud).

For a French cinéaste, *Les Vampires* is a cultural childhood lost—representing both an impossible innocence and a virtually forgotten commercial dominance—and *Irma Vep* has the atmosphere of a cheerful haunted house. René whispers cryptic phrases—he's his own oracle—while Léaud's mere presence effectively populates the movie with spectral performances for Godard and Truffaut, especially in the latter's movie-making movie *Day for Night*. (When, at the end of the proverbial day, a gone-to-seed Lou Castel appears as another washed-up '60s director, it allows Assayas a poltergeist reference to R.W. Fassbinder's nastier production paean, *Beware of a Holy Whore*.)

René is acutely aware that it is impossible to recreate Feuillade's unself-conscious poetry (as if to demonstrate this, *Irma Vep*'s least successful sequence has Maggie getting into character—slinking around her hotel and stealing a necklace) but, unburdened by such history, his star radiates sweetness and grace. Maggie is enthusiastic, hardworking, modest, and—never less than professional—somewhat baffled by the backbiting antics of her French colleagues. At the same time, as poured into her latex bondage suit, she's the universal fetish object of desire. "You want to touch her, play with her—she's like a plastic toy," the production's hyperfrazzled AC/DC costumier Zoë (Nathalie Richard) confides. This longing is compounded by interpolated

*Irma Vep*  
Written and directed by Olivier Assayas  
A Zeitgeist Films release  
At Film Forum  
Through May 13

*Children of the Revolution*  
Written and directed by Peter Duncan  
A Miramax Films release  
Opens May 1

BY J. HOBERMAN



Maggie the cat burglar in *Irma Vep*

scenes of the Feuillade original (Irma's abduction and unmasking), as well as the presence of Maggie's body double also in black latex.

Trapped in the phantom zone, temperamental René storms imperiously out from a screening of his dailies, leaving his colleagues in consternation and Maggie abandoned, forced to catch a ride to a crew party on the back of Zoë's moped. Anyone who has seen Assayas's sensational *Cold Water* knows that this director can choreograph a bacchanal. But in the theory-crazed world of *Irma Vep*, the revelers can't stop talking about movies—or even looking at them. Someone has commandeered the VCR to show the post May '68 faux Godard agitprop *Classe de lutte*, an even stranger fossil than *Les Vampires*—as well as another movie about movies. The image of a flickering Steenbeck image is underscored by the militant slogan: "Cinema is not magic: it is a technique and a science."

A different sort of cine-romantic, Assayas may beg to differ with that Marxist formulation although, as Maggie is gracious enough to demystify her own stardom, so *Irma Vep* exudes a restrained cinephilia that repeatedly ques-

tions itself. While waiting for René to return, Maggie is interviewed by an obnoxious French film buff who drones on (in English) in praise of John Woo ("*Bullet in the Head*—I think it's a great, great film") and Arnold Schwarzenegger, dismissing French cinema as snobbish, passé, and "nombilistic," (a wonderful Française coinage for "navel-gazing").

The self-parody is layered—in his days with *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Assayas edited the special issues "Made in U.S.A." and "Made in Hong Kong"—and even dialectical. Just as *Irma Vep* switches off between French and English (the latter serving as lingua franca), so the scene in which temperamental René admires a mad bit of HK swordplay in Maggie's vehicle *The Heroic Trio* (showing this weekend at Cinema Village) also serves to play "natural" Maggie off his mannered postures. Richly hybrid, *Irma Vep* opposes decadent French auteurism with insouciant Hong Kong pop, pits Gallic play against Hollywood materialism, and juxtaposes the urge to recycle the movie past with the desire to represent the moment.

The idea of remakes extends even to the soundtrack, which includes Luna's hipster cover of the gloriously absurd Brigitte Bardot-Serge Gainsbourg duet "Bonnie and Clyde," while, as if in counterpoint, the action is interspersed with a number of gratuitous "pure" film interludes—a conversation shot on a crowded metro, a few minutes of Zoë dancing in a strobe light. (A sharp-featured, stringy-haired bundle of rangy energy, Nathalie Richard may be the nerviest presence in new



Judy Davis as a starstruck, would-be red Saint Joan in *Children of the Revolution*

French movies.) *Irma Vep* is lighter than earlier Assayas but it ends marvelously with a taste of René's vision—an act of aggression that, combining kinesis and mystery, achieves a primitive

essence of cinema.

I wouldn't want to jinx the miraculous revival of a low-budget, free-wheeling, film-smart French cinema but—*zut alors!*—if it's not already here. *Irma Vep* isn't only about making movies—it demonstrates that making real ones is still actually possible.

**C**lib, jolly, and not overly concerned with anyone's lost innocence, the Australia-Miramax Cold War comedy *Children of the Revolution* explores another page of the post-modern scenario.

Like *Irma Vep*, this is a star vehicle about stardom. The most hardcore fanatic in the Australian Communist Party, Judy Davis's Joan Fraser is introduced circa 1951 launching into a heartfelt rant, disrupting the rhetoric of an anti-Soviet newsreel. It's a great comic turn. The actress's intensity—her all-over emotional vibrato—keeps her character from ever seeming a half-wit despite the traps contrived by writer-director Peter Duncan. The impassioned letters written by this starstruck, would-be red Saint Joan to the Great Stalin not only make the Russian censors weep but secure her an invitation to visit the Kremlin. Joan returns, pregnant with Stalin's child, to marry a timidly admiring fellow-traveler played by Oscar laureate Geoffrey Rush. (Only scarcely less outlandish, Duncan managed to get Davis, Rush, and Sam Neill, as a government double—or perhaps triple—agent, for his first film.)

*Children of the Revolution* intermittently pretends to be a pseudo-documentary but seems most at home in the realm of campy farce. Stalin (F. Murray Abraham) calls the Russian people his "pussycats" and refers to henchmen Beria, Malenkov, and Khrushchev as "The Three Stooges." The sub-Mel Brooks scene where he gets them to sing backup while he belts "I Get a Kick Out of You" is blithely tasteless but perhaps not quite tasteless enough. This Gumpish Cold War gloss eventually assumes the cutie-pie in-your-face quality of Australian comedies like *Strictly Ballroom* and *Muriel's Wedding*. Despite Duncan's thesis that Communism runs in families, like hemophilia or the Hapsburg jaw, *Children of the Revolution* loses momentum when the emphasis shifts from crazy Joan to her crazy son Joe (Richard Roxburgh) and his fixation with a leather-clad policewoman (Rachel Griffiths).

No way to fault Davis. She ages beautifully into a crotchety old crank watching Gorbachev on television and ranting about McSocialism. In an alternate universe, the subject of her rage might well be McMorice. **V**