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Review of Pretty Things

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Les Jolies choses/Pretty Things
(Synkronized USA, 11.6.2007)

The main reason for seeing *Les Jolies choses/Pretty Things* is Marion Cotillard. If you've seen her in *La Vie en rose*, you know she's a terrific, possibly great actress. *Pretty Things* offers the chance to see her tackle a similar role six years earlier, and she's almost as riveting as she is as Edith Piaf.

Written and directed by Gilles Paquet-Brenner, *Pretty Things* is the story of identical twins (both played by Cotillard) with opposite personalities. Lucie is carefree and outgoing, the favorite of her father (Olivier Granier), while Marie is withdrawn, considered ugly by la père. Naturally, Lucie becomes a coke-sniffing nympho, running off to Paris to do anything she has to survive, including performing in a porno film.

Lucie develops a platonic relationship with Nicolas (Stomy Bugsy), a songwriter, and is offered a recording contract even though she can't sing. So Marie, who can, is summoned from the country. While Marie performs in a club before recording VIPs, Lucie commits suicide. Marie impulsively assumes her sister's identity, shedding her drab bohemian garb for the revealing attire of, we're told several times, a whore.

The rest of the film is devoted to Marie's mixed feelings about music, success, sex, her family, and a whole slew of issues. She has conflicted feelings about Nicolas, recording executive Jacques (Patrick Bruel), and her ex-con boyfriend Sébastien (Titoff). *Pretty Things* is based on a novel by Virginie Despentes, who wrote and directed the controversial *Baise-moi*. It has a strong feminist viewpoint about how society exploits attractive, talented women and about how difficult it is for women to withstand such exploitation.

Pretty Things is not, however, didactic. Despite a nose bleeding from too much coke and some rough sex, it is not that sordid either. Paquet-Brenner moves the story along with considerable energy. He knows when to move the camera and when simply to focus on the expressive faces of his actors, especially Bruel, also a famous singer, and Bugsy, whose hip hop music is heard on the soundtrack. The director handles the identical- twins device quite well, with one remarkable shot of the sisters passing each other as if they were, in fact, being played by different people.

Which brings us back to Cotillard. She could have easily exaggerated the differences between Lucie and Marie but instead suggests these qualities subtly, making clear the thin line between the good one and the bad one and how the two overlap. Marie is incomplete without Lucie and must take on some of her characteristics not just to keep up the pretense but because Lucie is part of her. She must find a way to be Lucie without losing touch with her true self.

Much more voluptuous than in *La Vie en rose*, Cotillard is an arresting screen presence, loved by the camera, looking quite different from shot to shot. She inhabits both characters thoroughly, making us swallow the premise that one sister could successfully masquerade as the other. As Piaf, Cotillard doesn't, of course, do her own singing. Here she had a month to learn to sing and does so, in the big concert scene, acceptably, though the song spelling out all of Marie's anguish does not seem like something an audience would go wild for, as it does. An unsubtle arrangement makes it sound like just another bland pop tune. Cotillard is more compelling while being emotionally tormented than when singing.

While there are no extras, the transfer does capture the dark textures of Pascal Ridao's noirish cinematography. The yellow subtitles are quite easy to read.—
Michael Adams