

Claude Chabrol's The Blood of Others

Ingredients: a Simone de Beauvoir novel, *The Blood of Others*, adapted into a mini-series by Brian Moore; director Claude Chabrol of the French cinema's New Wave; producers John Kemeny and Denis Héroux; Jodie Foster and Michael Ontkean in the romantic leads, driven by love and war respectively; Sam Neill, John Vernon, Kate Reid, Stéphane Audran, Jean-Paul Aumont, among others, in supporting roles; Paris locations; Spanish Republican supporters; World War II; Nazi-occupied France; the Resistance movement; the sweep of history... Does all of this whet your appetite but make you feel a little nervous about what you might ingest?

The Blood of Others amounts to comic book history and five-and-dime romance. As such, it makes for fascinating television. Its components are so oddly mismatched that the result is actually entertaining. Put it this way: if mini-series were graded like movies, this one would garner a big capital B.

Imagine, if you will, Barbara Stanwyck in the role of Madame Butterfly... O.K., that's enough. Now, watch Jodie Foster playing a starry-eyed Parisian *haute couture* shop girl. The casting of Jodie Foster in the role of Héléne, a young French woman who philosophically holds love above all other ideals, mars any potential *The Blood of Others* might have had in rising above the grade. It is not that Foster is a bad actress; certainly, she is not. It is that she is completely ill-suited to her role. Foster is one of the most intrinsically 'American' actresses on the screen today and as an actress she seems unable to break out of the parameters of that description. Her demeanor is broad, brash, edged, cocky and not even a French *coiffe* can soften the effect. Unfortunately, there is not a moment in the seven-and-one-half hours of screen time in which Foster is believable as Héléne; the leap of faith is simply impossible to make.

Some respite can be found in Michael Ontkean's performance as Jean, a French Resistance fighter who places political activism above all else, including his love for Héléne, a woman who has placed her love for him above all else. Ontkean's performance is soft and inoffensive. It contrasts the essence of the scripted character's moral fortitude and thereby plays well. It is not an exciting performance but it is certainly interesting enough to hold our attention and afford us some indication of what Héléne sees in Jean.

What emerges as the highlight of the series is the performance by Sam Neill in the role of Bergman, a perverse, opportunistic German



The midwest meets the Left Bank; Jodie Foster is hilariously miscast in *The Blood of Others*

businessman who is obsessed with Héléne. Here is a consummate actor who knows how to tune his performance to the needs of the medium. Neill revels in the lasciviousness of his character, bringing to the role an undertone of smooth, diseased menace.

Supporting performances are uneven. For example, Jean-Pierre Aumont, as Jean's wealthy publisher father, plays it straight and respectfully; John Vernon, as a Nazi general, camps it up (rather successfully) whereas Stéphane Audran, as a *haute couture* designer who has an affair with the Nazi general, tries the same and only succeeds at being annoying.

Aside from the variances in the performances, Chabrol manages to shape a few good dramatic moments; far too few and far between, however, to bring real life to this lumbering mini-series.

Richard Ciupka, as director of photography, has shot *The Blood of Others* beautifully, but the cold look chosen does not help bring needed energy to the series.

A lushly romantic musical score by François

Dompierre much enhances the often sparse scenes. Although sometimes overused, its themes are quite beautiful.

Good use is made of archival footage at the beginning of each installment of the *The Blood of Others*. Of good quality and superbly edited, this material provides us with just enough of the sense of time and place to create a sufficient historical backdrop to allow the romance to unfold.

Brian Moore's screenplay is overburdened by screen time. What is presented to us in *The Blood of Others* could have been condensed quite nicely into a feature-length film. It is interesting to note that the mini-series was shot with just such an intention although four years after the project was produced we are only now seeing the mini-series and there have been no signs of a feature-length film having been distributed. The screenplay contains a lot of action scenes but very little suspense and few situations clever enough dramatically to really grab the imagination. Moments which should add needed excitement to the mini-series only

succeed in dragging it down.

The philosophical underpinning for the screenplay, taken from de Beauvoir's novel, is evident but only sparsely drawn and, as a result of the leads' performances, takes on little more meaning than the stuff of soaps. Héléne becomes merely irritating as she voices her love for Jean over and over again. As a woman with talent and fortitude, she seems the fool to cast all her energies towards a man who is more in love with political action and continually regards her with a kind of loving bewilderment. What is in essence an analysis of the love of the individual versus the love of humanity in general in the novel, becomes, in the mini-series, simply the story of an incompatible couple in troubled times.

Toby Zeldin •

THE BLOOD OF OTHERS p. Denis Héroux, John Kemeny d. Claude Chabrol sc. Brian Moore. Based on the novel by Simone de Beauvoir. A Cine-Simone-Filmmax-Antenne 2/Films A2 co-production.