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REVIEWS: CHOCOLAT



Terra/Miramx Films

It's difficult to resist the cliché puns that spring to mind when writing about the movie *Chocolat*, director Lasse Hallstrom's (*Cider House Rules*) latest offering, starring Juliette Binoche and Judi Dench. So, why resist? Good or bad, *Chocolat* drips with tempting analogies for every degree of one's personal taste.

One could say, as some critics have, that it's sickeningly sweet and saccharine and promotes nothing short of celluloid-induced tooth decay. Or one could say, as this critic does, that it is a delectable treat for the heart and soul and a veritable feast for the senses.

But a word of caution: *Chocolat* is a comic fairy tale. It is therefore quite whimsical and requires a certain suspension of belief. If viewers can accept that and simply indulge in the film's sensual beauty, they will enjoy the film, which has been nominated for five Academy Awards. In addition to Best Actress and Best Supporting Actress for Binoche (*The English Patient*) and Dench (*Mrs. Brown*), respectively, it has also received nominations for Best Picture, Best Musical Score and Best Writing.

As we all know, however, fairy tales are life lessons disguised in frivolity and fantasm. As sugar-coated as it is, *Chocolat's* message is plain: One small taste of life's pleasures can awaken the soul and bring about profound change. And Hallstrom relates this message with a strong cast and luxurious cinematography.

*Chocolat* takes place in 1959, in a quaint, isolated French village where life hasn't changed in 100 years. One winter day, when all of the townspeople are attending church, Vianne Rocher (Binoche) and her daughter Anouk (Victoire Thivisol of *Ponette*) blow into town on the blustery North Wind.

In a symbolic nod to the Grimm's brothers' Little Red Riding Hood -- perhaps the most famous of fairy tale femmes -- both Vianne and Anouk are wearing bright red capes. This gesture taps familiar feelings of fear and dread and effectively signals trouble ahead. It also demonstrates how Vianne and Anouk bring a splash of color to the homogenous little town.

Hallstrom effectively uses color throughout the film as a theatrical device. The village and its inhabitants, for instance, are enshrouded in gray, with their stone buildings, dark clothing, somber expressions and overcast skies. Vianne, however, poses a striking and luscious contradiction with her bright-pink lipstick and pink pumps. When she opens a chocolate shop in the sleepy little town, having rented and cleaned out a dusty old patisserie, she paints it in rich shades of turquoise, maroon and gold.

Predictably, neither Vianne nor her shop are entirely welcome. The town mayor and self-acclaimed protector of piety, Comte de Reynaud (played quite comically by Alfred Molina), dislikes the fact she's opened her store just days before Lent. He also



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disapproves of Vianne because she doesn't attend church, she has a child out of wedlock and she engages in the pagan art of chocolate-making. He thus embarks on a campaign to close her shop by discouraging the villagers from patronizing it.

But the villagers trickle in one by one, intrigued by Vianne and her chocolates, which she laces with chili pepper for spice and texture. Among Vianne's "regulars" is her landlord (Dench), a bitter old libertine whose prissy, over-protective daughter (Carrie-Anne Moss of *The Matrix*) has forbade her from seeing her only grandchild. There is also a kleptomaniac (played by Lena Olin) whose husband, the town's drunken saloonkeeper, beats her.

After sampling her chocolates, Vianne's customers discover a new appreciation for life and its pleasurable possibilities. The battered kleptomaniac leaves her husband, and the landlord pursues a relationship with her grandchild behind her daughter's back.

Even the Comte undergoes a catharsis, of sorts, after he tastes Vianne's confections. Recently deserted by his wife and struggling to maintain strict, religious order in the village, he collapses under his own vice-like grip on his emotions and has a nervous breakdown. He breaks into Vianne's shop and shamelessly gorges himself on her chocolate. The next morning, he awakes to find himself curled up in the display window with a contented smile across his chocolate-stained face. He is reborn.

Dench plays the crusty landlord with cunning instinct and finesse. And Binoche skillfully brings the same subtle texture and richness to her character as the chili pepper that Vianne adds to her chocolate. Johnny Depp (*Edward Scissorhands*, *Sleepy Hollow*) makes a delicious appearance, as well, as a handsome Irish river-rat who convinces Vianne to change her wandering ways.

Hallstrom successfully and succinctly conveys the idea that life is about embracing and celebrating people's differences, being open to change and balancing conviction with confection -- or the sweet pleasures the world has to offer.

#### **Christine Lyall**