



The new girlfriend

Director: François Ozon

Country: France

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A review by David Rooney for *The Hollywood Reporter*:

.WARNING: THIS REVIEW REVEALS THE FILM'S PLOT



The seductive mystery fiction of British writer Ruth Rendell has proven highly adaptable source material for a number of non-Anglo European filmmakers, among them Claude Chabrol in *La Ceremonie* and *The Bridesmaid*, Claude Miller in *Alias Betty* and Pedro Almodovar in *Live Flesh*. Francois Ozon joins the list with *The New Girlfriend*, spun from a 1985 short story by Rendell into a delectable riff on transformation, desire and sexuality that blends the heightened reality of melodrama with mischievous humor and an understated strain of Hitchcockian suspense.

Ozon has carved a career out of scratching beneath the cool surface of the contemporary French bourgeoisie to expose the many deceptions, fetishes, transgressions and hidden longings that lurk there. This movie carries on in that vein, even if it's something of a tease in that it continually threatens to turn dark without fully going there. Compared to the nine-page Rendell story, which ends on a note of chilling finality, this very loose adaptation is subversive but just as often playful and even tender in tone.

More than any other Ozon film, it shows a kinship to the work of Almodovar, whose affection for some of the elements being explored here — cross-dressing, gender identity, sexual fluidity — has been evident in films from *Law of Desire* to *Bad Education*. Indeed, any number of Almodovar titles, had they not been taken, could have been a snug fit here: *Labyrinth of Passion*, *The Flower of My Secret*, *Talk to Her*, *The Skin I Live In*. It's a little obvious, but even *High Heels*.

The New Girlfriend opens with a brilliant compressed narrative that shows Ozon in dazzling command, aided by cinematographer Pascal Marti's sinuous camerawork. An exquisite young bride in a white coffin is revealed to be Laura (Isild Le Besco), whose lifelong best friend Claire (Anais Demoustier) delivers an emotional eulogy at the funeral during which she swears to watch over Laura's infant daughter Lucie and her widowed husband David (Romain Duris). In key snippets from the dead woman's life we see her grow from a baby Brigitte Bardot to a high school heartbreaker to a wife and mother before succumbing to a swift and unforgiving illness. The mutual passion of childhood and adolescent female friendship is evident in these quick snapshots. But it's above all the somewhat mousy, almost boyish-looking Claire who is besotted with Laura, a few steps ahead of her at every important juncture of their lives, and now serenely beautiful even in death. The setup is no less affecting for its speed, and yet there are hints of something off-kilter to come, with unsettling clues planted in Philippe Rombi's insinuating score.

Like Ozon's 2012 film *In the House*, this one unfolds in the pristine suburbs of some unnamed French city, a kind of Gallic Stepford. Claire is too depressed following the funeral to check in on her goddaughter and David, but after a nudge from her grounded husband Gilles (Raphael Personnaz), she drops by his house unannounced. A major reveal happens roughly 10 minutes into the movie and is the plot point from which the entire complicated psychosexual scenario evolves. So it can't be considered much of a spoiler to disclose

that Claire finds David quite literally compensating for the sudden absence of a maternal figure in little Lucie's life by getting in touch with his feminine side. Shocked at first by David's open admission of a long-standing cross-dressing habit, Claire is also tickled to be in on his secret. He explains that he's not gay but has always enjoyed wearing women's clothing, and in both his words and body language, Duris makes this confession seem the most natural thing in the world.

David also opens up about never having had the courage to go outside the house and be seen as a woman, something he craves and Claire nervously facilitates by agreeing to be his date for an afternoon of shopping and a movie. Keeping all this from Gilles, Claire impulsively comes up with the name of Virginie for the "girlfriend" she's spending so much time with, and it sticks. She helps David/Virginie with his wigs, makeup and wardrobe choices, and he becomes a surrogate for her friendship with Laura while also coaxing out Claire's own femininity.

Ozon has great fun here playing with the idea of the double in terms that owe much to Hitchcock. He also milks delicious humor from Virginie's hungry embrace of glamour, whether it's a soignée movie goddess look that Claire has to nix as appropriate daywear, or sitting up with a breakfast tray and a sheer pink bed jacket like something out of a Doris Day movie. But what's crucial is that the film never mocks David/Virginie. Quite the contrary, in fact. That's especially true in a marvelous scene in which he and Claire go to a gay bar where a drag performer (Bruno Pepard) lip-synchs a 1970s song called "Une Femme avec toi"; the romantic rapture of the number about feeling all-woman speaks directly to David, bringing tears to his eyes. Here as elsewhere, Ozon's music choices are spot-on, from the bubbly energy of Katy Perry's "Hot N Cold" to a blast of vintage fabulousness from gender-ambiguous disco queen Amanda Lear on a dance floor where a hot lesbian flirts with Claire.



It's when the suggestion of sexual attraction creeps into the friendship between Claire and Virginie that desire, guilt and confusion start butting heads. While Ozon arguably gets a little crazy with the complex negotiation of those feelings, resulting in some mild mid-film slackening of tension, the characters are so well drawn and richly shaded by the actors that *The New Girlfriend* never loses its grip. A soupçon of homoerotic frisson between David and Gilles (albeit imagined by Claire) adds to the heady sexual brew. However, while the infinitely mutable byways of desire and self-discovery are Ozon's principal terrain, the film also yields touching rewards in its observation of the lingering power of love after death. Memories of Laura inform the development of the central relationship in ways that are quite stirring and entirely without disloyalty. Likewise, the characters' shared devotion to Lucie. All of that comes together in a lovely open-ended wrap-up that closes this twisty, joyously perverse film on an unexpectedly sunny note.

The cast is ace. In Christophe Honoré's *Seventeen Times Cecile Cassard*, Duris already demonstrated his beguiling way with femme moves in a campy rendition of the eponymous cabaret dancer's song from Jacques Demy's *Lola*. But the actor takes it to another level here. His slender, willowy frame and sculpted features make Virginie a figure of womanly elegance. He's charming when playing the coquette, though it's the emotional release visible beneath the makeup that gives the performance its buoyancy. Claire is no less interesting a character, and the appealing Demoustier (*Bird People*) makes her timidity and fearfulness quietly moving. But it's her emergence as a woman more secure in her own skin and in control of her desires — a transition smoothly paralleled with that of Virginie — that makes the film so pleasurable.

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