

Séraphine

France / Belgium

Cert PG 2008 126 mins

Credits

Director	Martin Provost
Screenplay	Martin Provost Marc Abdelnour
Cinematography	Laurent Brunet
Editor	Ludo Troch
Art Director	Thierry François
Music	Michael Glasso

Cast

Yolande Moreau	Séraphine Louis
Ulrich Tukur	Wilhelm Uhde
Anne Bennent	Anne-Marie Uhde
Geneviève Mnich	Madame Duphot
Adélaïde Leroux	Minouche
Nico Rogner	Helmut Kolle
Françoise Lebrun	Mother Superior
Serge Larivière	Duval

Synopsis

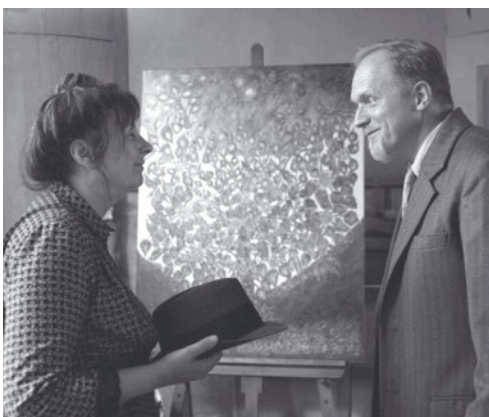
Senlis, north of Paris, 1914.

Wilhelm Uhde, a German art dealer, rents an apartment in a house where Séraphine works as a maid. At night the devout Séraphine paints, inspired by religion. Her employer derides her 'naïve' painting but Uhde is impressed. He encourages her and buys some paintings, but is forced to leave by the outbreak of war.

In 1927 he returns and settles in nearby Chantilly with his sister Anne-Marie and his lover Helmut. He is dazzled by Séraphine's new canvases and promises to make her famous. Séraphine starts spending extravagantly and behaving oddly. Uhde is badly affected by the recession, and Séraphine is frustrated by the consequent postponement of her exhibition.

She is arrested as she roams the streets of Senlis in a lavish 'wedding' dress. She is incarcerated and spends the rest of her life in an asylum.

Sight & Sound, Dec 2009.



Review

The triumph and fascination of Yolande Moreau's performance as the French painter Séraphine de Senlis (1864-1942) is in the way she makes us believe - completely and without questioning - that Séraphine is some kind of divine vessel.

When we meet Séraphine, she is in the most humble of circumstances, an aging, overweight scrubwoman, virtually penniless, eking out an existence by doing domestic work in a small town. She has no one. She's almost invisible to the world, and the few who take notice of her treat her as if she's an idiot. Yet from the beginning, when we see her sitting on a tree and looking at the sky, there's a strong sense that this woman is being spoken to by unseen forces. She's plugged into some other dimension, which makes her a little crazy and a little ecstatic, one of those wonderful saints of art.

Séraphine, which won the César (the French Oscar) for best picture this year, tells the story of the artist's life, beginning from the point just before her discovery, in the early 1910s, by the German critic and collector Wilhelm Uhde (Ulrich Tukur). Moreau's performance is perfectly calibrated, a mix of madness and rapture, simplicity and heightened perception, humility and artistic arrogance. Moreau hands us a mystery, but one so full of detail that we know it's our fault for not understanding. We can't know Séraphine, because we're not Séraphine. The best we can do - the closest we can come to finding her - is to watch her painting.

Watching Moreau in the painting scenes is like watching Harpo Marx play the harp. In those moments, this person is no longer there. This person is visiting some other plane. We become witnesses to the divine communication that makes sense of the eccentricity. This is no simple being, but some variety of greatness we never could have imagined or anticipated.

And the art doesn't disappoint. Séraphine's primitive nature studies show flowers that look as if they're pulsing, with a mix of beauty and threat. They look as if the artist saw God's face and went crazy - or almost crazy. You look and wonder if she's in possession of a gift or a curse. The art is that intense.

The film, by contrast, is measured. It's a movie about a scrubwoman who paints - so don't expect lots of sex scenes or car chases. Just expect a great performance by Moreau, who will convince you that she painted every one of those paintings - and lived them all before she painted them.

Mick LaSalle, San Francisco Chronicle, July