

Sympathy for the Devil

Film review

anon.

1970

“Sympathy for the Devil,” Jean-Luc Godard’s first film since his masterly “Weekend,” is full of radical rhetoric, Black Power, white fascism, graffiti, pornographic novels and rock music. Watching it is often difficult and demanding because Godard poses questions while denying us answers. Yet it is an impressive visual and aural orchestration of incredibly diverse parts, and its appearance is a cinematic event of the highest order. “Sympathy for the Devil” is about, among other things, the experience of artistic creation.

The film contains ten precise episodes, five of which (the odd-numbered ones) consist of footage shot during the Rolling Stones’ recording session of “Beggar’s Banquet.” We watch as the song “Sympathy for the Devil” grows from rough rehearsals through a series of tentative arrangements. The sessions are presented in great detail, and the sound quality is superb.

At first the tempo is slow, the rhythm section uncertain. Nicky Hopkins is playing organ where we know he’s going to be playing piano; hindsight makes it easy to see what’s wrong. Finally, there is a change in rhythm, and with the stronger beat Hopkins switches to piano and the whole thing begins to drive.

Jagger’s vocal builds along with it. Over and over again, each time with a subtle shift in attack, he rides into the words: “Let me introduce myself...” The band, in the meantime, is building a vehicle for him to ride, working now in terms of single notes and drumbeats. The camera is almost constantly in motion, stopping now and then to study Jagger, making quiet points in passing.

Simultaneously, as the song grows, Godard’s movie begins to take shape; it doesn’t so much progress as it encompasses. Like Godard’s previous “La Chinoise,” “Sympathy for the Devil” might be subtitled “fragments of a film in the making.”

Godard has devised some ingenious passages that tie the picture together: Anne Wiazemski (the student Maoist of “La Chinoise,” and the new Mrs. Godard) playing tricks with political graffiti—(“Vietnam” becomes “SoVietnam,” “cinema” gives way to “cinemarxism”).

On the soundtrack we hear racy excerpts from a porno-political novel starring General Westmoreland, John Birch’s daughter, McNamara, and Pope Paul. There’s a lovely “Up Against the Wall, Motherfuckers” fugue; black revolutionaries toss rifles around, rape submissive white girls, read aloud from Eldridge Cleaver.

On April 9 through 12, the Wayne Cinema Guild will present this subversive film in Detroit. Advance-sale reserved-performance tickets are \$1.50, or \$2 at the door. Tickets are now on sale at the Wayne State University Center building box-office, or may be purchased by mail by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope with the correct amount in cash or check to: “Sympathy,” Wayne Cinema Guild, Box 14, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan 48202.

The performances are scheduled thus: Thursday and Sunday, April 9 and 12, at 7:30 and 9:45 p.m. in Helen DeRoy auditorium located on the Wayne State University Campus. Friday and Saturday, April 10 and 11, at 6:00, 8:30 and 11:00 p.m. in Upper DeRoy; and at 7:15, 9:45, and Midnight in Lower DeRoy.

In addition, on Tuesday, April 7 at 10:30 p.m. on channel 56 in Detroit, the Wayne Cinema Guild will sponsor a color telecast of "Voices," a 70-minute film-diary on the making of "Sympathy for the Devil." Included with the documentary footage on the film and the Stones is an interview with Godard, along with scenes from "Weekend" and "La Chinoise."

See it.

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