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**KINGS  
& QUEEN**

A Film by ARNAUD DESPLECHIN

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Two former lovers find their paths crossing and their lives inextricably linked. Nora, whose bright detachment hides a terrible passion, and Ismael, a man caught up in a succession of bizarre adventures, both feel imprisoned as they search for freedom. Gripping and highly original.

FRANCE • 2004 • 150 mins • Color • In French with English subtitles

## Regal Cinema: Desplechin's extravagant soap opera boasts at least four ideas a minute.

J. HOBERMAN

**R**ich and strange, Arnaud Desplechin's *Kings and Queen* is a movie of large gestures and outsize performances. This extravagant family melodrama, one of the highlights of last year's New York Film Festival, runs two and a half hours and never lags, so moment-to-moment enthralling are Desplechin's narrative gambits, as well as his reckless eccentricity.

At 44, Desplechin has established himself as the least predictable, most interesting of younger French directors—and certainly the most film-intoxicated. His movies are remarkably generous; his interviews give evidence of considerable enthusiasm, for the process even more than the history of cinema: "I love to make films like roller coasters," he told *Cineaste*, explaining that while shooting *Kings and Queen* he nailed a Truffaut maxim to the wall: Every minute, four ideas.

On one hand, Desplechin is a devoted director of actors and even, as demonstrated by his last two features, the daringly preposterous *Esther Kahn* and jittery *Playing "In the Company of Men,"* something of a performance theorist. No less than those of John Cassavetes or Mike Leigh, Desplechin's movies are all about actors. But he's also a montage-mad experimentalist who cannot help but cubistically de- and reconstruct their performances once he gets the material back in his lab.

*Kings and Queen* does not lack for conventional histrionics. As a single mother lumbered by a complicated past, as well as her weathered stick of a father (Maurice Garrel), Emmanuelle Devos gets to express every emotion; her all-out performance in the role of Nora does everything but upstage co-star Mathieu Amalric's manic turn as her flamboyant ex-husband Isma (Both are veterans of Desplechin's 1992 first feature, *La Sentinelle*, and his 1996 breakthrough *My Sex Life . . . or How I Got Into an Argument*.) Cast as a prodigy of determination, Devos can shape (or perhaps will) her doughy features into a sort of incandescent beauty. She's a wonderful actress and, because this is a Desplechin film, she plays a character who is also "acting."

As befits a soap opera, fully half of *Kings and Queen* takes place in the hospital. Just as Nora learns that her father is suffering from advanced cancer, two men in white coats arrive at Ismael's door. (His sister, even nuttier, has agreed to have him committed, apparently because on his last manic jag he lavished her with Christmas presents, in July.) Ismael's capture is total slapstick. Desplechin stages mental illness for comedy—or rather, excessive theatricality. There's plenty of drinking and drug-doing at the hospital, as well as entertainment—as when Ismael performs the moonwalk for the other denizens of the dayroom.

Nothing is straightforward. Narrative is akin to conspiracy—and not just because Nora turns out to be a not altogether reliable narrator. One of the odder aspects of this madcap ensemble piece is the mysterious smiles with which the actors regard each other, most disconcertingly Nora's wide-eyed first husband and the waif-like inmate (Magali Woch) Isma befriends in the mental hospital when he's not kibitzing with his lawyer (Hippolyte Girardot), the most substance-abusing counselor since Benicio Del Toro stole *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. This puppet-show effect packs the movie with sacred monsters, not the least of whom is Catherine Deneuve's regally hyper-sensitive and disapproving hospital shrink.



*Kings and Queen* is also filled with free-floating symbols. The names "Nora" and "Ismael" come with ready-made literary associations. The Greek myth of Leda and the Swan is strategically referenced—perhaps to elevate the drama; perhaps to suggest an unhealthy relationship between Nora and her father; perhaps, as this divine rape resulted in the birth of the beautiful Helen, to provide a never explained backstory for the emotional Trojan War waged between the impossibly poised Nora and the four men in her life: one old, one young, one living, and one dead. (Devos has described Nora as "monstrous and grandiose like Antigone.")

For much of the movie, plot is trumped by texture. Desplechin typically cuts from one chaotic scene to another. Highly original in his flashbacks and dream sequences, he organizes almost free-associational mood shifts and uses music from Mancini's "Moon River" (Nora's theme) to mad klezmer tootling—to keep things off balance. The unstable continuity is further fissured by vérité jump cuts, swish pans, and unmotivated repetitions. Relationships are only gradually revealed; things are always more complicated than they initially seemed. The narrative takes a few hairpin turns, sometimes on two wheels. *Kings and Queen*'s second half, titled "Cruel Releases," shuttles back and forth between Isma madhouse and Nora's death watch, providing a series of terrible confrontations and revelations—one of which spins the whole crazy whirli-gig in an entirely unexpected direction.

Ismael is fond of the word *impedimenta*—meaning the psychological baggage that keeps people from functioning as they would wish—but Desplechin appears to thrive on the structures that impede narrative progress. *Kings and Queen* just picks up the baggage and runs—it's terrific filmmaking.

### KINGS AND QUEEN

Directed by Arnaud Desplechin; written (in French, with English subtitles) by Mr. Desplechin and Roger Bohbot; director of photography, Eric Gautier; edited by Laurence Briaud; production designer, Dan Bevan; produced by Pascal Caucheteux; released by Wellspring. Running time: 150 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Mathieu Amalric (Ismael), Emmanuelle Devos (Nora), Valentin Lelong (Elias), Jean-Paul Roussillon (Abel), Maurice Garrel (Jennsens), Nathalie Boutefeu (Chlo), Magali Woch (Arielle), Hippolyte Girardot (Mr. Manne) and Catherine Deneuve (Madame Vasset).

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