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The Origin of Evil (15)

Dir: Sébastien Marnier

With: Laure Calamy, Doria Tillier, Dominique Blanc

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Synopsis: When factory worker Stéphane gets in touch with wealthy Serge announcing that she is his long-abandoned daughter, his immediate family are none too thrilled. As Stéphane embarks on an extended visit in hopes of getting to know Serge, she also becomes entangled with the hostile women who share a tense existence in his beautifully appointed mansion by the sea: Serge's wife, his other daughter, a rebellious granddaughter, and a strangely off-putting housemaid, all of whom are clearly unsettled by the arrival of Serge's newly announced heir. But Stéphane is a confident liar with secrets of her own and nothing is as it seems.

Sébastien Marnier's *The Origin of Evil* is, by its delicious final reel, a movie all of its own. At times it feels like a queer(er) *Rebecca* (1940) made by Claude Chabrol had he lived to see *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* (2010 –). This high flown tale of family, double-crossing, toxic patriarchy and murder gives a plum roll to Laure Calamy as Stéphane, a working class factory worker who sets out to finally meet Serge, her rich, previously unacknowledged father in the forbidding house he inhabits with his equally forbidding wife, daughter, granddaughter and maid. What does Stéphane seek from her father? Revenge? Money? Love? What does this ailing tyrant want from her? How will the seething women folk in the paternal household deal with this cuckoo in their midst?

So many aspects of the film are expertly calibrated for tingling camp pleasure, from the arch performances (Dominique Blanc, as Serge's wife Louise, is serving *Phantom Thread* to the power of Almodóvar) to the set decoration (stuffed animals galore), and entire wall of VHS tapes) right through to the very camera work (witty split screens; a crane shot used for nothing more than to film three people on a sofa). The fact that Stéphane's job is in an anchovy-packing factory, the almost total lack of men, and two deeply enjoyable murder scenes are merely icing on the cake.

Nothing is quite as it seems in *The Origin of Evil*; traditional elements of story seem at first to be withheld, only for Marnier to clunk the audience on the head by revealing them later on. This makes for an unsettling tone at the movie's outset, which takes time to adjust to: are we in a social-realist comedy? is this a black-hearted thriller? Who is this protagonist about who we know so little, other than that she is played by the winsome Calamy,



trying her best in this hostile environment? Stéphane's identity and what is motivating her gradually turn this part into Calamy's best role, delivering dark comedy and sadness in equal measure; over the film's duration, the actor steadily dials up the fervour to 11.

If *The Origin of Evil* were only lurid camp it would pall fairly quickly, but Marnier is careful to weave a fine vein of pathos through this narrative. The absence of Serge's beloved son, a homosexual man, hangs over proceedings; so too does Stéphane's need for love and belonging, which leads her to act so rationally. Serge's terrible violence and megalomania, initially only hinted at, are ultimately brutal, more than counterbalancing the film's tart comedy. The film's wicked ways hit home with all the more jouissance for being deceptively anchored in the real.

Credits

Nathalie Cordier	Laure Calamy
George Dumontet	Doria Tillier
Louise Dumontet	Dominique Blanc
Serge Dumontet	Jacques Weber
Stéphane Marson	Suzanne Clément
Jeanne Patterson	Céleste Brunnuell
Agnès	Véronique Ruggia
La logeuse	Clotilde Mollet
Samira	Naidra Ayadi
La co-détenue	Blandine Laignel
La surveillante prison	Laurence Huby
La juge de tutelles	Caroline Roulin
Maître Ajello	Maître Ajello
L'avocate de Louise & Georges	Maria Pinto Bonito
La directrice du secteur usine	Caroline Ferrus
La surveillante cour de prison	Sheila Maeda
Policier Flavien	Anthony Deroche
Policier Youcef	Julien Naccache

Director	Sébastien Marnier
Screenplay	Fanny Burdino
Cinematography	Romain Carcanade
Music	Philippe Brault, Pierre Lapointe
Editing	Jean-Baptiste Beaudoin, Valentin Féron
Casting	Leila Fournier
Art direction	Joy Klasen

France 2022 123mins

Another view

Shirking any preconceived notions of slick, polished con-artist tropes, *The Origin of Evil* brings something altogether more complex – and quite frankly weird – to the table.

Laure Calamy plays a squirrelish woman on the cusp of middle age who spends her days packing anchovies and fish soup in a fish plant. At the local prison, she is stood up by the unseen person she's there to visit. When she returns to her terraced suburban home, an older landlady tells her she has to move out, before lavishing her in forehead kisses. Our mysterious lead works up the courage to make a call to Serge Dumontet (Jacques Weber), seemingly her birth father with whom she's trying to reconnect with after the death of her mother. This tantalising drip feeding of disjointed information by writer/director Sébastien Marnier not only adds layers of tension, but allows for consistent fun and satisfying reveals for the entire run time.

Calamy's character Nathalie Cordier is posing as Stéphane, who as it turns out, is also her girlfriend and the intended recipient of that earlier prison visit. When she meets Serge, the pair bond in a manner strangely flirtatious from Serge's POV. When he invites his "daughter" back to his palatial home, she gets an ice cold reception from his hoarder wife, Louise Dumontet (Dominique Blanc), his ambitious daughter George Dumontet (Doria Tillier) and their devoted servant Agnès (Véronique Ruggia). They suspect Nathalie-posing-as-Stéphane is a gold digger of sorts, but Nathalie avoids detection and worms her way into becoming a fixture in the lavish space. No longer propagating the image of the charming patriarchal tycoon, Serge reveals himself, in these closer quarters, to be a coarse and lecherous bigot. As the family divides into factions, a series of double crosses ignites a violent battle to control the family business and estate.

Much like the film's fabulously convoluted plot, the camera work reflects an eccentricity; slow zooms and dolly shots might give power to a character, while high angles take them away. The use of split screen places diners at a dinner table in the same frame, or announces an uninvited guest stalking outside a window. The grading is rich, conveying the lavishness of the production design and cluttered excess of the props. The sound design is strong, tense, pulsing in some moments, or pacey or humorously light in others. There's one element of narrative logic that doesn't quite ring through, in how someone with such determination and commitment to the grift works in a fish plant. In reality Nathalie would be a hedge fund manager or the head of a bank.

There are elements of this film that feel exploitative. The opening shot depicts the locker room of the fishpacking factory. This is a nod to the classic opening of *Carrie*, sure – but one wonders in the professional work environment of a fish packing facility, would so many women really just stand around, chatting topless? This continues into some of the sensual scenes between Nathalie and Stéphane, the camera lingers on these intimate moments for a beat too long. The same goes for a scene where Nathalie is taking a bath. The gaze of the lens sits admiring her before the next beat ensues. There's even a naked lesbian fight scene in the prison. Marnier is obviously doing his bit to ensure the continued employment of French Intimacy coordinators with every production.

The stellar performances of the entire cast mean the chemistry fueling the dynamics of these mostly terrible characters is just fantastic. Doria Tillier as George is strong, furious and powerful; Jacques Weber as Serge is vile, explosive and delivers pure BCE (Brian Cox Energy). However Laure steals the show. She makes such interesting, often comical choices in personifying this awkward and hilarious conwoman. Her demeanour is that of a gentle people pleaser, masking that pitch black and quasi delusional madness underneath in a way that will have you squirming in your seat.

Gemma Creagh: Film Ireland

Our next screening - Friday January 24th, 7.30pm All We Imagine as Light (India 2024 115m 15)

Released in November 2024 to great critical acclaim, after winning the Grand Prix at Cannes earlier that year, Payal Kapadia's second feature (though her first fiction film) takes us into the lives of 3 hospital workers in Mumbai who are drawn together by the difficulties they encounter living in Mumbai. The film is not just a glimpse into each of these women's lives, it also provides a portrait of the city itself and the Society is thrilled to have secured a screening so soon after the film's release.