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## Movies


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**DIVA will be screened by Cincinnati World Cinema at 7 p.m. Jan. 29-30 at the Cincinnati Art Museum.**  
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### Film Review: Diva

*Restored 1980s French film still makes a point today*

**BY Steven Rosen | Posted 01/23/2008**

Jean-Jacques Beineix's classic *Diva*, now being re-released in a gorgeous new 35-millimeter print, is one of the coolest, most visually compelling art movies ever made. That it also works well as an unsentimental thriller is a definite plus.

Ironically, the storyline -- the perils of music piracy -- has more relevancy now than in 1981-82, when *Diva* first came out.

At the time of the film's original release, French film was finally emerging from its great but aging New Wave era and starting to respond to what was new and cutting edge in the rest of the world. That included not just the violence of American movies but also British punk sensibilities and the ideas of the international contemporary art world. Today it plays like a missing link between *Pulp Fiction* and the stylized tough-guy French gangster films of the 1960s (such as *Le Samourai*) that Tarantino loved.

It was only the second film for Beineix, then in his mid-thirties but already holding a decade's worth of experience as an assistant director. *Diva* was a sensation -- I remember trying to get into crowded screenings at downtown's The Movies -- its surreal art direction, high fashion and neon-bathed cinematography looked as much like a museum exhibit as a real world. Watching it now, one can clearly see the influence of neon artist Dan Flavin in the lighting and sets.

Sometimes cinematographer Philippe Rousellot (who won an Oscar for 1992's *A River Runs Through It*) establishes shots that glow like giant-sized still photographs -- a yellow Citroen sedan centered perfectly in front of a lighthouse, for instance.

And though a French film, it found a mesmerizing star in the American opera singer Wilhelmenia Wiggins Fernandez, whose



Cincinnati World Cinema

**American opera singer Wilhelmenia Wiggins Fernandez stars in the French film *Diva*.**

haunting performance of the aria from Alfredo Catalani's "La Wally" serves as *Diva's* soul. That the semi-reclusive Fernandez through the years has become far more mysterious than her character in *Diva* only adds to the film's allure.

Based on a novel by Daniel Odier, *Diva* starts with young French postal clerk Jules (Frederic Andrei), still in uniform, rushing into an opera house to hear Cynthia Hawkins (Fernandez) sing. *Diva* announces itself as unusual right away in the look of the opera house. With peeling paint and aged walls, it could have just recently been uncovered by archeologists.

Cynthia only sings live, believing that a recording makes artificial that which is "real" -- specifically, the human voice in song. That such an idea is encased in a film, artificial by its very nature, is one way in which *Diva* is intellectually conceptualist.

Jules has a tape recorder in his briefcase and secretly records the performance to play at home. And smitten with Cynthia, he seeks her out both backstage and in her hotel suite. But he's a dreamer, not a danger. Their developing relationship -- carried on amid her spectacular wardrobe changes -- becomes one of the story's plot threads.

But only one. For as Jules is making a delivery on his scooter, two Mutt-and-Jeff-style gangsters from a prostitution ring track down and kill a woman on a busy street. She's first able to slip a tape into his bike satchel that implicates a police official in their ring, and they then must find him to get it back. At the same time, two thuggish music pirates from Taiwan learn about Jules' tape of Cynthia and try to get that.

Also present, affecting Jules in a different way, is a sexy Vietnamese punkster (Thuy Ann Luu) who roller skates around a loft apartment while an odd Beatnik-hipster existentialist (Richard Bohringer) meditates on the floor before a pile of jigsaw pieces. The latter ultimately becomes Jules' protector of sorts, showing up almost magically whenever he's most needed.

It's impressive how Beineix can connect everything at the end as well as he does without making the resolution too rushed or letting the artifice overpower the tension. I will say, however, that the Mutt-and-Jeff gangsters play too cartoonish today.

He even leaves room for a final meeting between Jules and Cynthia that has a fitting, operatic quality. It's good to see this *Diva* back, still looking good and exuding hip style. **Grade: A-**

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