



SUMMER HOURS (L'Heure D'ÉTÉ)

Spring
Season
2009

Geoff Andrew, Time Out:

In the pleasingly rambling garden of a country house north of Paris, lecturer Frédéric (Charles Berling), New York-based designer Adrienne (Juliette Binoche) and Jérémie (Jérémie Renier), who toils profitably for a French sportswear company in Beijing, are gathered with partners and kids for a lunch to celebrate the seventy-fifth birthday of their widowed mother Hélène (Edith Scob). She's the proudly independent and protective keeper of the flame – and the valuable collected belongings – of her late uncle, a well-known artist, so when, months later, Hélène herself dies, the three siblings come together once more to decide what to do with the house, its coveted contents, and Hélène's faithful housekeeper Eloise...

Assayas's most fully satisfying film for some while, this is a warm, wise drama about the tensions and mysteries of family life. With a seemingly loose but meticulously assembled narrative in the style of his earlier ensemble piece 'Late August, Early September', it chronicles the interactions between the various characters with psychological subtlety and precision, even as it explores the changing roles played by art, property, work and blood-ties in an increasingly globalised world.

While never ignoring the grief death causes, Assayas refuses to sentimentalise; it's a film of deft, delicate nuances, particularly alert to the fact that everyone has not only his/her reasons but also, inevitably, secrets that will be borne to the grave. Perhaps the characters are finally a little too uniformly decent, but it would be churlish to bemoan the generosity of spirit in a film so beautifully performed, intelligently written and fluently directed.



Derek Elley, Variety:

Like Taiwanese helmer Hou Hsiao Hsien's *Flight of the Red Balloon*, the film stems from a commission by the Musée d'Orsay to celebrate its 20th anniversary. The modern-art museum gets extensive verbal and visual references throughout - including a brief guided tour for two of the protagonists near the end - but Assayas constructs a convincing enough surrounding package to ensure that the picture is more than just a puff piece.

The opening 40 minutes take place at the comfy rural retreat of Helene Berthier (vet Edith Scob), who's celebrating her 75th birthday with her two sons, Frédéric (Charles Berling) and Jérémie (Jérémie Renier), plus their wives (Dominique Reymond and Valerie Bonneton, respectively) and kids, and her daughter, Adrienne (a blonde Juliette Binoche). The atmosphere is summery, but with a discernible edge: The whole family doesn't get together that often, as Adrienne lives in New York with Yank boyfriend James (Kyle Eastwood, seen briefly later) and businessman Jérémie is always on a plane somewhere.

Helene's house, tended by devoted housekeeper Eloise (Isabelle Sadoyan), is a shrine to the paintings and acquired artworks of her late brother. Helene uses the family gathering to have a quiet word with Frederic, whom she considers the rock of the family, about how to dispose of the artefacts after her death. Rather than see them sold off piecemeal, she wants them to be preserved as a private collection in a museum.

Some time after Helene's death, Jérémie springs the news that he's relocating for business reasons to China, while Adrienne is about to settle down Stateside and marry James. As the only one left in France, Frederic argues the strongest for their mom's collection to remain intact.

Largely through the fine ensemble playing -- with some discreet observational acting by Reymond as Frederic's wife, Lisa -- the film develops a subtle feel for the undercurrents that divide the siblings and Frederic's growing sadness that a generational change is taking place now that their mother is gone. Adrienne is very much the family outsider -- emphasized by Binoche's distracted performance - but there are also incipient tensions between the two brothers that are worked out in a subsequent scene at a cafe, nicely played by Berling and Renier. As the picture moves into winter, and the Musée d'Orsay reps visit Helene's home, Eric Gautier's lensing takes on a harder, cooler look, with more saturated colours, accompanied by a growing sense of loss. The final half-hour further emphasizes the sense of the generational torch being passed, as Frederic's teen daughter (Alice de Lencquesaing) assumes a larger role. Transition is initially clumsy, but the ending neatly reprises the summertime opening from a new perspective.

Assayas' script is more allusive than demonstrative, with a distinct whiff of Eric Rohmer in its conversational blocks separated by fadeouts. At the end of the day, it's a slim movie, with no dramatic fissures or development of the characters. Personal memories become public property and a fractured legacy; as Lisa notes, life just moves on.

