

## **JANUARY, 2013 FEATURED LVCA DVD DONATION REVIEWS**

### **LA GUERRE EST DECLAREE (DECLARATION OF WAR)**

**FRANCE, 2011      100 minutes    live action feature dramedy**

**MATHEMATICAL RATING: 8 of a possible 20 points**

**\*\* of a possible \*\*\*\*\* rating**

**POINTS KEY: 2=superior    1=satisfactory    0=deficient**

**1 DIRECTION by Valerie Donzelli**

**0 EDITING by Pauline Gaillard**

**1 CINEMATOGRAPHY by Sebastien Buchmann**

**1 LIGHTING**

**0 SCREENPLAY / Written by Valerie Donzelli  
and Jeremie Elkaim**

**1 MUSIC by Antonio Vivaldi, Georges Delarue,  
Peter Von Poehl, Luiz Bonfa, Jacques Offenbach, Blind,  
Johann Sebastian Bach, Valerie Donzelli and Jeremie Elkaim,  
Yukse, Ennio Morricone, Jacques Higelin,  
Sebastien Tellier, Laurie Anderson, and Jacno**

**2 PRODUCTION DESIGN by Gaelle Usandivaras**

**1 SOUND by Sebastien Savine, Andre Rigout  
and Laurent Gabiot**

**1 ACTING**

**0 CREATIVITY**

**PRIMARY CAST: Jeremie Elkaim (Romeo Benaim), Valerie Donzelli (Juliette), Brigitte Sy (Claudia Benaim, Romeo's mother), Elina Laudenbach (Alix, Claudia's friend), Michelle Moretti (Genevieve, mother of Juliette), Philippe Laudenbach (Philippe, Juliette's father), Bastien Bouillon (Nikos, Romeo's pal), Beatrice De Stael\*(Dr. Ghislaine Prat, pediatrician), Anne Le Ny (Dr. Fitoussi, neuropediatrician), Frederic Pierrot \* (Professor Sainte-Rose, neurosurgeon), Elisabeth Dion (Dr. Kalifa), Gabriel Elkaim (Adam Benaim, Age 8), Cesar Deseix (Baby Adam Benaim at 18 months), Henri Horeman (Infant Adam Benaim at 6 months), Lucia Sanchez (Director of Day Care Center), Marion Lecrivain (Marion, the babysitter), Anne Gastaut (folksinger)**

**\*identifies outstanding acting performance**

**Paris, early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The City of Light and Moonlight Romance serves as backdrop for a tale of young love and early disorder.**

**Romeo and Juliette meet at a swinging party. Their initial contact consists of a nut toss across a crowded room into an open mouth. What a reception! Apparently, Romeo still adores the childhood hippopotamus game and has discovered his soulmate. Juliette's escort at the party is not so vastly entertained. His swing at Romeo is the first of a succession of conflicts comprising the plot of this picture.**

**The film's early scenes establish the youthful exuberance of the protagonists as they cycle and jog their way across and through postcard Paris. Life is better than good, it is ideal. And the future should be even better. For a child will cement their relationship. Are they in for a shock. Little Adam is flawed from infancy, deprived of what they take for granted: a healthy life. Eating far oftener than natural, crying almost constantly, exhibiting retarded motor development, their imperfect child is an unconcealable embarrassment. Not to mention a time-consuming monster depriving parents of both sleep and familial pleasure.**

**Eventually an alert pediatrician is contacted to investigate the infant's abnormal behaviors. Careful scrutiny and tentative diagnosis lead to test results confirming Romeo's conviction the child is suffering something far graver than growing pains. Adam is in mortal combat with a brain tumor.**

**Up to this point, the film has travelled a fairly straightforward path of predictability. Leads have been introduced, setting firmly established and plot problem clearly defined. But now the director loses critical discipline, permitting a series of frantic hyperdramatic scenes with crushed relatives to trivialize what should be a deepening of character.**

**At the very moment audiences expect internal soul-searching they are greeted with superficial posturing. Partly this is due to a complete lack of moral perspective in family and social environments. Both Romeo and Juliette confess themselves atheists, though Romeo is much more consistently secular. Juliette, when her spouse is not around, vocalizes a prayer to**

**Mary. Apparently she's had a Catholic upbringing. We're surprised to discover a trace of faith still alive in her. Or is she just trying to play it safe? No further signs of religion appear in the film. The potential recovery or death of the child is left to the skills of doctors.**

**LA GUERRE EST DECLAREE is publicized as a fairly accurate representation of struggles its heroic couple endure in the face of mounting obstacles, both interpersonal and financial. Viewers must decide for themselves whether the film's conclusion is justified by the behaviors of the leads. What kind of parents engage in wild partying when they hear their son's tumor is a rare, malignant and almost invariably fatal one? Why do they consistently flout authority and counsel, preferring to attack problems emotionally over engaging them rationally? Is this contemporary chic?**

**For the most part, the story presented is ably acted. But spectator involvement is sporadically throttled by extended fantasy sequences, including several seaside ones. These seem unfathomable. Maybe the parents actually did retreat into estrangement from social commitments and enforced hospital routines, preferring a marine neutrality. But the film never explains why this is so, or what value system, if any, is piloting them through their family crisis. Even existentialists have a philosophy to guide their conduct. So what is Romeo and Juliette's? That absence of guiding values is a cancer on the film itself.**

**Another major failing is the mélange of secular and sacred music employed as sonic commentary on the feelings of the two main characters. We seem to have a classic case of something being provided for everyone, with no regard for the score's inherent spirituality or naturalism. A similar misappropriation is the injection of scenes from Jean Painlevé's 1978 film CRISTAUX LIQUIDES into the first third of the film. (Note: I am indebted to Finnish cinephile Antti Alanen's 11/16/2012 film diary entry for this enlightening information.) Presumably they are intended to suggest the menace of the tumor on Adam's brainstem cells. Coupling this with Georges Delarue's 1970 radiosopic film music**

only suggests a whimsical expropriation of preexisting movie material designed for other purposes.

Production design is outstanding. Gaelle Usandivaras's sets convincingly simulate authentic hospital corridors, waiting rooms and offices. They look all too familiar, even to Americans, artificially vibrant attempts to camouflage otherwise omnipresent drabness and critical sterility. All that's missing are requisite smiling face stickers on walls. Kudos to Thierry Pitel, prop master, who employs everything from a Chinese charm to a nut projectile as material enhancements.

As is all too frequently the case, the director's decision to craft her own screenplay is a mistake. The final product lacks depth and artistry, with no memorable lines and far too much solipsism. Being hot-tempered and nebulous, Valerie Donzelli's verbal shortcomings need to be obscured. Not highlighted.

Lighting and sound are adequate, giving a suitable documentary atmosphere to most realistic scenes, though they are sadly abused in fantastic ones.

Pauline Gaillard's editing is sometimes ideally suspenseful. At other junctures, though, it is vitiated by inappropriate overextension such as a slo-mo littoral reunion and a painfully repetitious chanson extolling sensuality.

Adult acting achievement is occasionally undermined by operatic haminess. Sadly, the juvenile performers are only adequate. However, Frederic Pierrot's Professor Sainte-Rose displays commendable restraint, dignified humanity and quiet humor. Beatrice De Stael's observant pediatrician, Ghislaine Prat, is equally commendable.

According to IMDB rating statistics, DECLARATION OF WAR is screened by males about 3½ times more frequently than by females. Yet their average film rating is lower. Most of the audience for the film is between the ages of 18 and 44, surprising considering its somber subject matter (though treated jauntily by its creators). Perhaps the threatened child plot strikes home with them.

DECLARATION OF WAR is a moderately interesting drama that finally fails to validate itself as fully credible. Coming in the wake of generally laudatory festival reviews, it proved somewhat of a

**disappointment. It is suitable for adult audiences, but its prevailing amorality make it undesirable teen fare.**

**NOTE: LA GUERRE EST DECLAREE (DECLARATION OF WAR) is the scheduled January, 2013 LVCA donation to the Ligonier Valley Library and will be available from it.**

**JODAEIYE NADER AZ SIMIN (A SEPARATION: NADER AND SIMIN) is the scheduled January, 2013 LVCA donation to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pa. It is reviewed below.**

**JODAEIYE NADER AZ SIMIN (A SEPARATION: NADER AND SIMIN)  
IRAN, 2011 color 123 minutes live action feature drama**

**MATHEMATICAL RATING: 17 of a possible 20 points**

**\*\*\*\*1/2 of a possible \*\*\*\*\***

**POINTS KEY: 2=superior 1=satisfactory 0=deficient**

**\*following the name of a performer or technician indicates a notable achievement by that person**

**2 DIRECTION by Asghar Farhadi\***

**2 EDITING by Hayedeh Safiyari**

**1 CINEMATOGRAPHY by Mahmoud Kalari**

**2 LIGHTING by Koohyar Kalari**

**1 SCREENPLAY/Written by Asghar Farhadi\***

**2 MUSIC by Sattar Oraki**

**1 ART DIRECTION by Keyvan Moghadam\***

**2 SOUND by Mohammad Reza Delpak\* and Reza Narimizadeh\***

**2 ACTING**

**2 CREATIVITY**

**PRIMARY CAST: Leila Hatami (Simin, the wife), Peyman Moadi\* (Nader, the husband), Shahab Hosseini\* (Hojjat, Razieh's husband), Sarina Farhadi, daughter of the film's director (Termeh, daughter of Simin and Nader), Shirin Yazdanbakhsh (Simin's mother and mother-in-law of Nader), Kimia Hosseini\* (Somayeh, Razieh and Hojjat's daughter), Merila Zarei (Miss Ghahraii, Termeh's tutor), Sareh Bayat (Razieh, Somayeh's mother and Hojjat's wife),**

**Mohammad Ebrahimian (Judge), Barak Karimi\* (Interrogator), Ali-Asghar Shahbazi\*(Nader's father and Simin's father-in-law; Termeh's grandfather)**

**The most internationally honored film of 2011, JODAEIYE NADER AZ SIMIN (A SEPARATION: NADER AND SIMIN) from Iran is a welcome addition to a growing list of films dealing objectively with complex, ambiguous ethical issues. Like DOUBT, PROOF, DOG DAYS OF SUMMER, and HOUSE OF SAND AND FOG, A SEPARATION recoils from simple villain / hero classifications, instead presenting us with fallible humans trapped in situations they are unable either to escape or satisfactorily resolve.**

**In A SEPARATION every choice becomes a snare. Ultimately outside intervention will be required to prevent a tragic conclusion detrimental to both families at the center of this drama's conflict.**

**The cost of this intervention? Divorce, distrust and financial ruin. Child friends turned into wary antagonists. A younger generation imprisoned by evasions and mistaken judgments, all because of protective lies and omissions triggered invariably by a desire to shield someone.**

**In this film, self-sacrifice is not heroic martyrdom, but merely a catalyst for invading uncertainty and eroding integrity. No one we encounter wants to be unjust or cruel. This is apparent from Nader's plea to an interrogator not to jail his attacker Hojjit and Razieh's confession of self-doubt to Simin. But the consequences of individual decisions lead with Greek fatality to a painful ending.**

**Credit for making this descent into a moral abyss convincing must go to screenwriter Asghar Farhadi. By treating each conflicted character with respect and sympathy, Farhadi forces the viewer to judge whether there might have been a more tolerant approach permitting both families to retain self-respect.**

**At the beginning of the film, we discover a middle-aged Iranian couple, Nader and Simin, sitting in an interrogator's office.**

**Simin wishes to leave Iran in order to obtain for daughter Termeh a broader range of social and educational choices. She herself is uncomfortable in Iran's patriarchal, hierocratic society.**

**Nader, on the contrary, is at peace with his surroundings. If only females in his household would make themselves more self-assertive, instead of relying on money to solve problems. Just do what you believe is right, he instructs his daughter. Life is so simple.**

**Or is it? That complacent philosophy leads his family to disaster, grossly oversimplifying both social environment and individual personalities. Termeh is no mere carbon copy of her mother. And the authorities who restrict them are doggedly resistant. Not to mention formidably reinforced. Nader's attempts later at self-justification only land him in prison, a location working to his family's extreme disadvantage. Maybe accommodation has its uses, after all.**

**Nader's problem is not just that he cannot understand Simin. He also fails to comprehend the nature of his own society. Like his dad, Nader is chained to the past and unable, or unwilling, to adapt. Since Nader's father suffers from advanced Alzheimer's Disease, his inflexibility is involuntary. Not so his son's.**

**When Simin threatens to emigrate without him, Nader ignores the challenge, sure his spouse will never depart Iran without her daughter. Termeh loves Dad too much to leave him. So Simin is stuck in her homeland. The planned separation is merely a feint. But it requires a replacement caregiver for Nader's father.**

**Simin's candidate, Razieh, proves to be calamitously unprepared for the task. A devout working-class mother who can afford neither child care nor adequate prenatal health services, Razieh neglects her primary duty. In a misdirected attempt at compensation, she manages only to get herself hit by a vehicle. Subsequently she returns to her employer's house at a most inopportune moment. Angered by Razieh's seeming abandonment of his father, Nader berates and fires her. He is momentarily more concerned about his father's health than his employee's pregnancy. Razieh denies any negligence, obstinately refusing to leave with her reputation suspect. That is unbearable to Nader, who feels required to return immediately to supervision of his parent. Momentarily losing self-restraint, he tries to expedite Razieh's departure by shoving her out the front door of**

his apartment. Bad move. Razieh's hospitalization and miscarriage may or may not be the result. Nobody really knows.

In the middle of this muddle are two children who witness and ponder. Razieh's daughter, Somayeh, is an alert, exploratory child of about six with a fatal bent to experimentation and resultant coverup. At first a natural friendship bond forms between her and the separating couple's only child, Termeh. Somayeh perceives Termeh as an older playmate and potential big sister role model. Initially happy to obtain a very cooperative new friend, the less spontaneous older girl, attempting to establish an adolescent moral base, soon finds herself confronting situations too complex for naïve childhood principles. She, like Somayeh, is caught between the conflicting value systems of her mother and father. Worse, Nader and Simin require her to make a preference, with a constantly shifting future at stake.

Somayeh must also make a parental choice, since her mother Razieh and father Hojjat operate at cross-purposes. Hojjat blames his wife's miscarriage solely on Nader, wishing for blood money payment for the lost child. Razieh knows her miscarriage could have been due to a car accident, in which case it would be fairer to lodge a monetary claim against the driver, rather than Nader. Or was she more at fault for precipitating the collision by attempting to shove Nader's unaware father clear of traffic? Perhaps everything is really Somayeh's own fault. For she was the one carrying the garbage bag down the steps from Nader's apartment on Razieh's request when it tore and spilled. That left a mess which required mopping. The subsequent slickness just might have caused her mom's fall after Nader's push and then disaster to her unborn brother. So is she indirectly the fetus's murderer? Somayeh is too young to grasp the full significance of death, but she is fully aware of the wrongness of her defensive lies and probably feels her brother-to-be's loss is Allah's punishment for her misconduct.

Plenty of guilt to go around here. The film's atmosphere of suspense is further augmented by the estimable work of sound crew Mohammad Reza Delpak and Reza Narimizadeh. Each word of dialogue is captured successfully, be it whispered or screamed.

**Sattar Oraki's music is unfortunately too parochial to accomplish what Farhadi desired. Its Iranian nuances escape Western auditors, who wonder what a lullaby is doing in the midst of such spiraling storm and stress.**

**Accolades must go to at least a half dozen performers: Ali-Asghar Shahbazi as Nader's father, Peyman Moadi as the imploding Nader, Shirin Yazdanbakhsh as Simin's wisely tolerant mother, Peyman Sadeghi as a gruffly cynical doctor, Bahare Riyahi portraying a stressed, but efficient, hospital receptionist, and Barak Karimi memorably enacting a calmly rational interrogator confronting an impossible task of unearthing the truth. Perhaps most notable of all is the ceaselessly mobile, expressively mournful contribution of Kimia Hosseini, the guilt-ridden Somayeh.**

**Art direction by Keyvan Moghadam successfully converts an empty apartment into a thoroughly occupied family residence. No character travels into that set without stopping to touch something and move it: change, bookbags, Termeh's much-travelled school project, a refractory drink dispenser, slippery compact disks, glass-paned doors requiring numerous closings and reopenings for accommodation of private adult conversations.**

**To preserve a documentary ambience, lighting is appropriately subdued. Cinematographer Mahmoud Kalari is mostly restricted to medium close-ups highlighting performer faces and gestures. This is ideal for Farhadi's family chamber drama.**

**Surprisingly, the majority of IMDB raters of this film are between the ages of 18 and 29. The subject matter on the surface would not appear to be of compelling interest to them. Perhaps the publicity and honors accorded A SEPARATION draw them to it. 92% of raters rank the picture at 7 or above on a ten-point scale, an amazingly enthusiastic reception from such youthful viewers. audience. There seems little difference in overall response between males and females, 8.1 against 7.9, respectively.**

**Made on a budget estimated at about \$500,000, A SEPARATION has stockpiled more than ten million dollars in ticket and ancillary sales. It is both a critical and popular success. Rated PG-13 by the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America), the film's intensity, occasional vulgar language and**

**mature themes slant it to adult viewers, who will find themselves experiencing a fascinatingly layered character study and provocatively slithery screenplay. Let's hope it enheartens other filmmakers to take more risks in developing intelligently probing scripts.**