



New York Film Festival

Becoming Traviata

La traviata et nous

(Documentary -- France)

By [RONNIE SCHEIB](#)

A Les Film Pelleas production in co-production with Le Festival d'Aix-en-Provence and Jouror Developpement. (International sales: Films Boutique, Berlin.) Produced by Philippe Martin. Directed by Philippe Beziat.

With: Natalie Dessay, Jean-Francois Sivadier, Louis Langree, Charles Castronovo, Adeline Scarabelli, Ludovic Tezier. (French, English, Italian dialogue)

Riveting docu "Becoming Traviata" follows French theater/opera director Jean-Francois Sivadier and celebrated soprano Natalie Dessay through rehearsals for "La traviata," in a new production that strains for a perfect marriage of theater and music through an electrifying reimagining of the title role. A veteran of several music-themed docs, helmer Philippe Beziat covers key dramatic moments through numerous successive rehearsals, focusing on director and diva as they invent, repeat, refine and perfect their nouvelle Violetta, scene by scene. A treat for fans of opera, the performing arts and documentaries about process, "Becoming" reps prime arthouse fare.

The working relationship between Sivadier and Dessay plays like a duet as they pick up on each other's ideas, bounce them back and forth in sometimes differing directions, and build to an epiphany before moving on. Helmer Beziat often homes in on Sivadier as, lost in thought, he listens intently to the singers or dreams up bits of business to enhance the staging. Aside from suggestions about volume or emphases on certain words, Sivadier interferes little with the singing itself; almost all his efforts are aimed at blocking out action, so as to wring the last drop of emotion from each movement.

The breathtaking vibrancy of Dessay's thesping sweeps the viewer along as completely on the fifth run-through as on the first. Dessay's quicksilver absorption of Sivadier's suggestions, her gestures full of quivering, ecstatic energy, lends the docu immediacy, her performance almost leaping to the rafters. The usual barriers that opera constructs between performers and audience with opulent costumes and grandiose sets are here reduced to a bare set with a chair and chandeliers, or partial flats of pastoral gardens and blue skies used to indicate scene changes.

The film's Verdi score works in tandem with the onscreen action, and occasionally counterpoints the movements of Sivadier and the cast, Beziat sometimes even presenting images of players speaking and gesticulating in total silence. In contrast to the constant give-and-take that characterizes the Sivadier/Dessay partnership, conductor Louis Langree's relaxed, convivial guidance of the London Symphony Orchestra builds in one-way fashion.

The film heightens the intensity of its two lead subjects' rigorous sessions via closeups and two-shots, and even by framing them at the center of full-cast scenes. But Beziat eschews showing even a fragment of the actual final performance; the process of creating, moment by moment, the extraordinary figure of Dessay's doomed Violetta dominates here.

For the record, recycling "La traviata" is not exactly new ground for Sivadier, one of whose recent interactive plays, titled "Italienne avec orchestre," invites audience members into the orchestra pit, where Sivadier directs them as he would his musicians.

Camera (color, HD), Raphael O'Byrne, Hichame Alaoule, Ned Burgess, Matthieu Poirot-Delpech; editor, Cyril Leuthy; music, Verdi; sound, Laurent Gablot, Emmanuel Croset. Reviewed at New York Film Festival (On the Arts), Oct. 1, 2012. Running time: 108 MIN.