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***Nelly et M. Arnaud* – film -- analysis**

When Things Don’t Work Out

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I

I call this presentation, “When Things Don’t Work out.”

At the beginning of the film, Monsieur Arnaud – Pierre -- is alone, sitting in a restaurant as is his habit. At the end of the film, he is also alone with his thoughts at the airline ticket counter. Pierre appears confused and bewildered, wondering if he has made the right choice, to leave Nelly and to go on an impulsive last-minute round-the-world jaunt with his ex-wife, Lucie. Nelly, too, is alone at the end, having rejected Jerome, been rejected by Vincent, and abandoned precipitously by Pierre. And so themes of aloneness, rejection and the inability to form stable, on-going relationships are all highlighted in this beautiful and intriguing film.

There are triangular relationships galore: Pierre-Nelly-Lucie. Pierre-Nelly-Vincent. Pierre-Nelly-Isabelle. Pierre-Nelly-Dolabella. Jerome-Nelly-Laurence. There are meals during which people confide in the other, tender moments. There are also incidents that seem irrelevant -- like earrings that can’t be found, food brought to the wrong table, and constant interruptions.

Especially the latter. Pierre cannot get his work done on his book without interruptions: phone calls from his ex-wife; visits by the huge man in a black coat – Dolabella -- seeking money; books being disposed of while another book is being produced; visits by daughter; phone call from Vincent his publisher; phone call from Nelly’s mother; his ex-wife’s visit, and so on.

These interruptions are, in a sense, a metaphor for the entire film: that life is never a straight line. Aims and objectives get sidetracked by the fortunes of life. Pierre, fascinated with Nelly, yearns for her. Nelly wants a steady job and a stable

relationship with a partner who pulls his full weight. Vincent wants to settle down with Nelly. All have plans that are constantly foiled, thwarted. Life doesn't evolve quite the way we wish.

In this paper I'll focus on the interactions between Nelly and Jerome, then Nelly and Pierre and finally Nelly and Vincent. In each instance, there is miscommunication, thwarted objectives and a huge amount of reserve and distance.

II

Nelly and Jerome

Their marriage is collapsing. Married for 5 years, Nelly has been working a variety of part-time jobs to help make ends meet – at a bakery, in a print shop. We see her getting ready for work while Jerome lounges around in bed, smoking, watching TV, reading the newspapers. Nelly has just about had it with Jerome. The relationship is cool, distant, without affection.

Nelly meets her mentor, Jacqueline, for coffee. Jacqueline is an older woman who had had to terminate Nelly from a full-time publishing job because of downsizing. Nelly confides to her just how fed up she is with Jerome.

It is during this exchange that Pierre – Monsieur Arnaud -- shows up. He's an old friend of Jacqueline and a former lover. Left alone at the table while Jacqueline makes a phone call, Pierre stares at Nelly and starts asking her personal questions: is she still married? Happy? Worried? She answers his questions, politely, cautiously, curtly. He learns that the couple is in debt, six months behind in rent. Pierre offers her 30,000 francs. It's an honest offer he says...she can pay him back.

Nelly returns home to Jerome. Over dinner, she mentions that she had met an elderly gentleman, a friend of Jacqueline's, who offered her money. She tells a lie that she had accepted this and had paid off their debts. It's clearly a test. Jerome doesn't object and doesn't seem really interested. More to the point, he doesn't really seem to care. He never probes to find out if there are strings attached to this amazing deal. He's not concerned to find out more about this

mysterious elderly gentleman and his motivation for doing this kind deed. *Her* news is overshadowed by *his* news, that he spent part of the day talking with a door-to-door encyclopedia salesman.

Nelly tells Jerome that it's over. He's clearly is not interested in her or investing in their marriage. They separate, seemingly without much sadness. She moves out, temporarily staying with Jacqueline and then finding a place of her own.

So, this relationship comes to an end. Nelly can't get what she wants from Jerome. Her plans are thwarted. He doesn't really care about her and won't make the effort to make the marriage work by finding employment. Not the basis for a stable, productive, long-term relationship.

Nelly and Pierre (Monsieur Arnaud)

Pierre is a cultured, older man, writing his memoirs. He had been a judge in French Polynesia after WW II. He had also been involved in real estate – “making Paris ugly,” as he puts it -- and has been very successful. After breaking up with Jerome, Nelly meets with Pierre at a café and he gives her a cheque for 30,000 francs. Nelly offers to repay him but Pierre dismisses the idea. However, he's in need of a good editor who knows how to do word processing. A publisher, Vincent Granec, is interested in his memoirs. The manuscript is incomplete – “a first draft that needs tidying up” as he puts it. He asks Nelly if she'd be willing to work at his home for as long as it takes to get the manuscript finished. Nelly finds the idea attractive and over a celebratory cognac she agrees to start that week.

So begins the relationship with 65-year old Pierre Arnaud and mid-20s Nelly. They are each alone, solitary figures, both guarded and both vulnerable. And the situation arouses intrigue. What is Pierre's true motivation? What does he want from this relationship? What does he expect from his gift/loan? Is it appropriate for him to make the offer? Is this a set-up? What does she think is really involved? Where does she see this going? What do we make of this trans-generational relationship? Is it benign? Or is it in some sense disturbing, inappropriate?

And so begins the tense and delicate dance between the two.

They are brought together, spatially and emotionally, in his apartment. Each comes to need the other. Pierre clearly wants more than just an author-editor connection. We see him yearning romantically for her in spite of the two generation age gap. He's interested obsessively and inappropriately in her personal life involving men.

For her part Nelly is grateful to him for rescuing her. She's interested in his stories and observations, respecting his far greater world experiences. But she remains distant and curt. He asks her personal questions, about her relationship with Christophe, for instance, an old friend she had recommended to catalogue Pierre's books. She responds with a quick 'oui' or 'non' in reply. He asks personal questions about her relationship with Vincent, asking if they spent the night together, and she tells a lie, that they had. He's jealous, protective and somewhat resigned to the fact that she has a life separate from his – well, not entirely. He's emotionally voyeuristic, fascinated by her youth as he recounts the tales of his youth in the Leeward Islands.

Pierre has found in her a focus for his endeavours...but more than that, a companion, and perhaps – dare he hope -- a romantic partner? There is sexual innuendo when he says he won't take advantage of her and when he gives her a key to his apartment – what's that all about? There is a massage, for his back problem, followed by a celebratory dinner afterwards. All this is more than just an employer-employee relationship. So, for him, there is the hope for something more. Something that might bring back for him the pleasures of his youth. Is he aware of appropriate boundaries? Is she? For her part, she's pleased with steady work, a daily routine, and thus she enjoys a measure of stability and order in her life. And she's adept at keeping his intrusiveness at bay.

For the most part, it's a warm, civilized interdependence, all masked with the on-going development of the book, yet with subtle undertones of repressed sexuality, naiveté, exploration of feelings. She feels comfortable with him. In one disturbing scene, however, they argue and hurl angry words at each other. Pierre berates Nelly for her unwillingness to let him into the details of her life. She had been preoccupied by a visit to see Jerome at the hospital, admitted because of a

self-induced overdose and there she learns that he already has found a new partner, Laurence. Pierre is ruffled, accusing her of not being interested in the book, refusing to open up about her life, “a vegetable” he shouts at her.

Irritated by Pierre’s overstepping the boundaries, intruding into her personal life, Nelly replies that she is being paid to work, not to divulge her personal life. The argument escalates and Pierre shouts that Nelly should go and do what she really wants to do, screw Vincent Granec, his editor, whom she has been seeing. She leaves, rejected, dejected, but says she will return in two days.

We’ll return to Pierre in a moment.

Nelly and Vincent

The relationship between Nelly and Vincent is brief and quickly comes to naught. Nelly and Vincent dine at a restaurant and she is only half listening to what he is telling her. It suddenly dawns on her that he has been looking at apartments in the hope that she’d move in with him. Taken aback by how rushed all this is -- again someone overstepping the boundaries, someone thinking only of themselves and their needs -- she blurts out, “No, I don’t want that now. I can’t lie about it. I like how we see each other. Stolen moments.”

Stolen moments. Stolen from whom? Vincent asks. Nelly shrugs off a reply. She says that she’s happy with the way things are. Vincent accuses her of being afraid while Nelly says she’d just like things to continue as they are. But they can’t and Vincent dumps her ... “let’s call it quits.” And he tells her to go.

Vincent is of course right. Nelly is fearful, afraid of any intimate relationship that might become as empty as the one she had with Jerome. And she is right, that these moments with him were stolen, stolen from Pierre with whom she felt safe. Safe, embraced by a substitute father perhaps.

So, in this case, Vincent and Nelly, neither is getting what each wants. Nelly, not yet divorced, is seeking a comfortable relationship without demands. Vincent – ever-in-a-rush Vincent -- wants a relationship that involves co-habitation. So each has different objectives and neither works out and their relationship is thwarted.

Back to Nelly and Pierre

Upon leaving Vincent, a distraught Nelly goes immediately to Pierre's apartment. He's still up, working over his manuscript. They have a drink while she confides in him about her confrontation with Vincent. He is the father-confident she never had. She asks Pierre if she can stay the night.

Later that night, Pierre still working on the manuscript, pauses, takes off his glasses, turns off the light, and sits in the darkness. Voyeuristically he approaches Nelly lying asleep in bed. He looks at her, longingly, and traces the outline of her bare shoulders ... tracing but never touching. Just looking. Nelly stirs and sees him, asking him drowsily, 'You can't sleep?' to which he replies, "no," and indicates that he'll be going. "No stay" she insists and takes his hand. "Just for a minute" he replies. And like a reassured child Nelly goes back to sleep with her hand grasping his. It's a touching moment and each sees the other as they truly are, as child and father, not beloved and lover, not seduced and seducer.

The next day, Lucie, Pierre's ex-wife arrives from Geneva. Her husband had recently died. She is introduced to Nelly who has clearly stayed the night. Lucie smiles and asks about the book, "How is it coming." And in a series of delicious ironies we move forward to the end of the film. "We're almost done," Nelly replies, not realizing what she is actually about to experience that, yes, they are almost done, her and Pierre. "Does he mention me?" Lucie inquires. "You're about to arrive" and Pierre adds with a flourish, "You come in at the end like a ray of hope." Nelly departs, reminding Pierre that her divorce proceedings take place on Monday so she won't be in until Tuesday.

In quick succession, Nelly undergoes divorce proceedings. The next day Nelly receives a voice message from Pierre asking her to come in early to the apartment. She's greeted with an array of suitcases. Pierre confides that he is leaving with Lucie on an extended trip, to Geneva, Istanbul, the Far East, Seattle. Pierre and Nelly are alone as the bags are being taken to the taxi. It's an awkward, poignant moment. Pierre is sad, apologetic. Shocked, Nelly is unable to say anything. They hug. He leaves. It's over.

Or is it? We see him, at the end, at the airline ticket counter, alone, bewildered and confused...has he made the right choice?

The film ends with Nelly walking off with the completed manuscript. She's alone. But with a job that starts in a couple of months.

Why does nothing work out? Why has nothing worked out between Nelly and Jerome, with Nelly and Vincent or with Nelly and Pierre?

III

This is a film about stymied objectives, thwarted plans. Nothing works out the way each person hopes for. Jerome, perhaps depressed, cannot provide what Nelly expects and simply lounges around being unwilling or unable to find work. Nelly wants to get on with life, to be financially secure, with a job, in a stable relationship. That doesn't happen. The whirlwind publisher, Vincent, is in a rush to settle down, but that's not what the not-yet-divorced Nelly wants. So that doesn't happen. Pierre wants to recapture the excitement and romance of his youth. Not respecting the boundaries between the generations, Pierre wonders if Nelly is the person to allow him to experience all these adventures over again. But that doesn't happen. She wants to live her own life, not his life over again.

So, each person in Nelly's constellation of relationships is not at the same place in life as she is. The expectations are mismatched and so nothing meshes, nothing sticks.

As a result, they miss important signals along the way. Jerome does not pick up on Nelly's desire to get on with things: she rushes out of the house, so fast that she does not have time to talk to her mother on the phone. Vincent is self-absorbed and never takes into account what Nelly wants. Pierre languishes in voyeuristic fantasy and misses the cues of distance that Nelly gives off. Nelly misses signals that Pierre is clearly winding down his affairs -- disposing of his library, writing down his memories, completing the book, and paying off Dolabella -- and that this isn't likely to be a long-term arrangement.

So one reason why things don't work out is that there is no congruence of objectives. Each aim is inhibited by where they are in life.

Another reason has to do with attachment theory. Everyone seems to be unable to make relationships stick. Focusing just on Nelly, we note that her mother is relatively absent...she doesn't seem to have a close relationship with her, preferring instead to confide in Jacqueline and, on one occasion, with Pierre. Her father may be referenced in one phone call, about her mother having to tell 'him' and if 'him' refers to father, then he is still alive but he is not someone she'd tell directly about leaving Jerome. Nelly has parent issues and while not discussed in the film, they may play a role in why she is unable to form deep, on-going relationships.

Attachment theory is a psychological model that aims at explaining the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. John Bowlby pioneered the field which postulates that the attachments, or lack thereof, in a person's infancy and childhood, affect and prefigure attachments later on in life. This model has been extended to adult romantic relationships in the work of Hazan and Shaver. The distance between Nelly and her parents may help to explain why she cannot form lasting relationships in adulthood. Others here tonight can better comment on attachment theory than I can.

So, we've mentioned three themes: ignoring appropriate boundaries, thwarted personal objectives and attachment issues that make forming relationships difficult. Finally, there are three other themes I haven't touched on. One is irony – Pierre writing a book while disposing of his library. Another one is rejection. Nelly rejects Jerome and she, in turn, is rejected by Vincent and Pierre. Another theme is boredom, something that Pierre mentions over and over again.

But over now to you. What do you find intriguing about this film?