

"one of the most profound tributes one art form has ever paid to another"

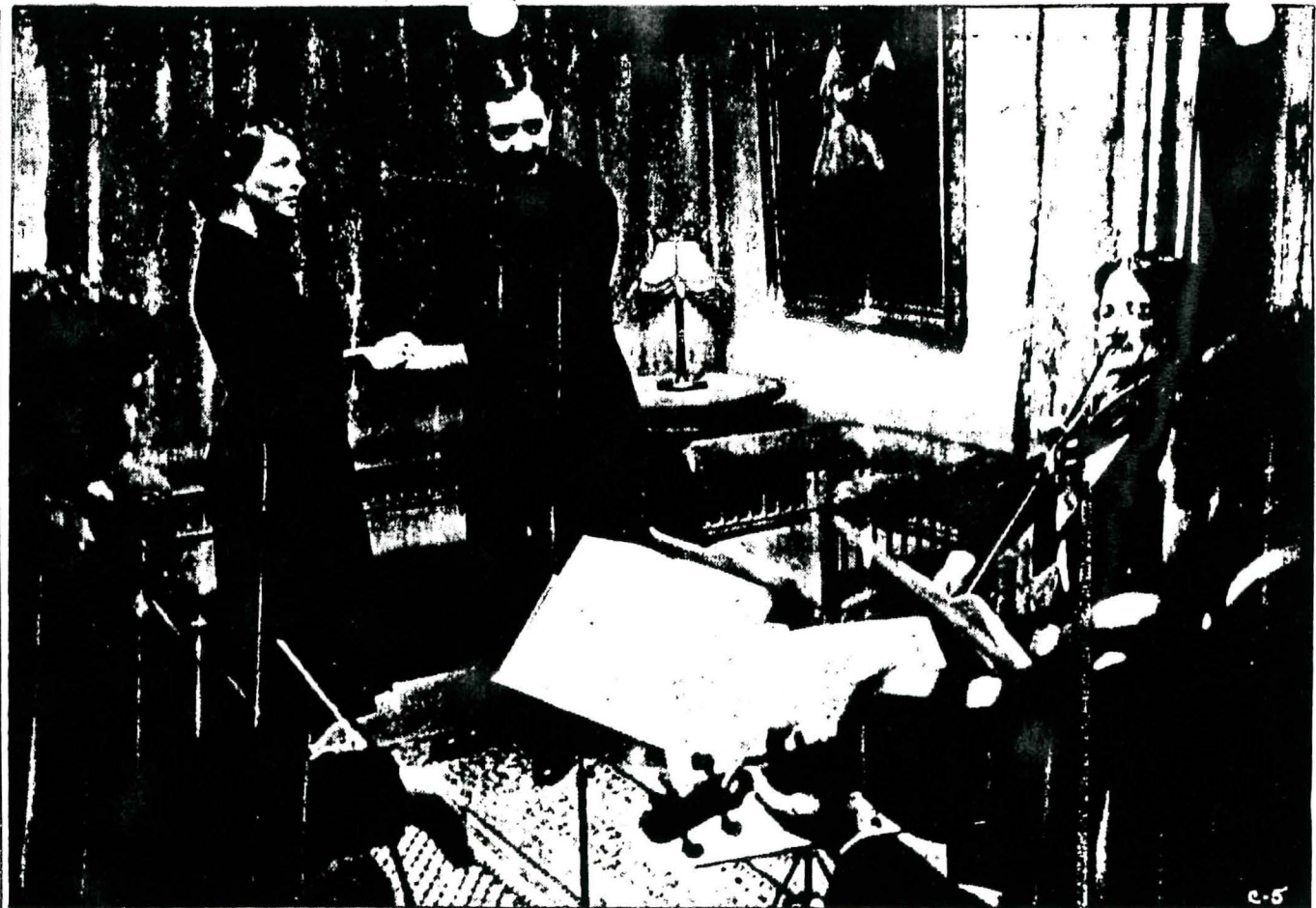
By Andrew Sarris

CELESTE. Directed and written by Percy Adlon. Screenplay based on *Monsieur Proust* by Celeste Albaret. Released by New Yorker Films.

LES TURLUPINS. Directed by Bernard Révon and Didier Bouquet-Nadaud in collaboration with Michel Zemer and Claude deGivray. Released by Quartet/Films Incorporated.

When people ask me if I have seen any good movies lately, they are not usually thinking of the offerings on display at such an eminently useful institution as the Film Forum at 57 Watts Street. Certainly, the Forum's remarkably varied programs are of little concern to Aljean Harmetz's "industry" columns for the *Times*, or to the *Variety* box-office charts. When Harmetz can write pityingly of the "mere" \$18 million grossed by *Annie Hall*, and of the "disappointing" \$23 million garnered by *The World According to Garp*, the take at the Forum in even the best of times cannot be considered even pennies from heaven. Nonetheless, a comparatively unheralded entry entitled *Celeste*, which opens October 6 at the Forum, is one of the most engrossing films I have seen all year. Properly promoted, it could turn out to be this year's *Stevie* in the way of an offbeat cultural attraction. Anyone who has ever felt the slightest stirrings of passion for Proust is bound to be deeply moved by this elegant rendering of the domestic details involved in the heroic creation of one of the world's literary masterpieces.

I have not read *Monsieur Proust* by Celeste Albaret, the writer's housekeeper during the last bedridden years of his life, and the best thing I can say about the film is that it makes me want to read this book very much. It is a strange work that Percy Adlon has fashioned from this material, but it is a work also that is comfortable with its strangeness. The very notion of this quintessentially French subject rendered in German, and for much of the time an unusually spare, laconic German, seems odd at first. Ultimately, however, the extraordinarily sensitive and subtle performances of Eva Mattes as Celeste and Jürgen Martin as Marcel Proust sweep all before them. One is not sure at the outset whether Percy Adlon has conceived of Celeste in a comic mode as a feminist heroine before her time. Before the end, and particularly after the death of



Celeste: the domestic details behind a literary masterpiece

Footnotes on Proust, Grace, Reed, and Connors

Proust, it becomes clear that *Celeste*, at least in this version, was less exploited than transfigured by her slavish devotion to her somewhat bizarre employer. The pacing of the film is weighted nonetheless toward the drudgery and tedium of Celeste's routine in the kitchen, while Marcel is scribbling away in his cork-lined bedroom. The long silences are broken very infrequently for cryptic insights into the miracle and mystery of creativity. Still, we are reminded forcefully that Proust, like many of his contemporaries, stood at the great divide between a self-glorifying

romanticism and a self-doubting modernism. His cathedrals of prose rose atop foundations of painfully acquired facts. For her part, Celeste grasped intuitively what was needed of her in order for Proust to complete his life-consuming mission. See *Celeste*, and stay with it through its final, convulsive moments and you will be privileged to experience one of the most profound tributes one art form has ever paid to another.

Film: 'Céleste,' a Memoir of Proust

By VINCENT CANBY

"CÉLESTE," which opens today at the Film Forum, is a small-scale, remarkable little film based on "Mr. Proust." This is the memoir of Céleste Albaret who, for nine years before Proust died in 1922, was his cook, companion, secretary, friend and surrogate mother during the creation of "Remembrance of Things Past."

The film, an exceptionally interesting first feature, by Percy Adlon, a German documentary film maker, is spare and almost minimal in style. Yet it comes close to being Proustian in its meticulous attention to details of sound, light and movement, as well as to the details of a daily routine that prescribed exactly which route Céleste was to follow to go from kitchen to bedroom and back.

Virtually the entire film takes place inside Proust's apartment, and much of this inside the cork-lined room where Proust (Jürgen Arndt) sleeps during the day, awakens at 4 in the afternoon, has his tea with milk and then, propped up on pillows, works on his manuscript all night. Outside, in the space inhabited by Céleste (Eva Mattes), the world is assaulted by never-ending sound, by the ticking of clocks, the creaking of floor boards

In a Cork-Lined Room

CÉLESTE, written and directed by Percy Adlon; screenplay (German with English subtitles) based on "Monsieur Proust" by Céleste Albaret; photography by Jürgen Martin; distributed by New Yorker Films. At the Film Forum, 57 Watts Street. Running time: 107 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Eva Mattes and Jürgen Arndt

and the clinking of pots being set atop the stove as gently as possible.

"Céleste" also possesses a lot of Céleste Albaret's modesty, humor and impatience with convention. The film is not about a writer writing but about a rare friendship, in the course of which each person learns to respect the other's particularity.

Céleste, who is no slavey, sometimes talks directly to the camera and sometimes remembers the events that the audience sees. She's a robust young country woman, the wife of one of Proust's taxi drivers, and a personality in her own right.

Though she does an increasing amount of secretarial work for Proust as his health fails, she never does read his books. She functions instead as an ear, listening not only to his tales but also bringing back to him everything she hears on her errands as messenger to his elegant friends.

In one moving scene, Proust carries on coquettishly with Céleste, declar-

ing that the only reason he never married has been because he was waiting for Céleste. This prompts her to ask if he makes a difference between carnal love and platonic love. Proust snaps back, "I don't know what you mean." He tells her stories about society, male brothels and food. She tells him about her childhood.

Because of its nature, the film cannot entirely avoid name-dropping — Cocteau, the Goncourt Prize, the Princess Something-or-Other — but because of the intensity of the feelings being expressed within the apartment, "Céleste" never becomes one of those films in which everything of any importance seems to happen off-screen.

Mr. Arndt is a most convincing Proust, dandyish and precious on occasion, but also capable of surprisingly ferocious emotion. Miss Mattes, who is best known here for her fine performances in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's "Jail Bait" and Werner Herzog's "Stroszek," becomes a woman of beauty and stature, truly "la belle Céleste" as Proust called her. It's quite a leap from the vicious teenager of "Jail Bait" and the hard-luck, slightly simple-minded hooker of "Stroszek," and she accomplishes it with infinite grace.

Mr. Adlon has created a very special, unusual work.

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Serving at a shrine TIS April 2 1982

By Richard Mayne

Céleste

Camden Plaza Cinema

It sounds an impossible task: a film in German, with English subtitles, about a great French writer. Joseph Losey's famous project of bringing Proust to the screen, with the help of Harold Pinter and Barbara Bray, seems to have gone into eclipse: how, after all, could a film do justice to so elaborate a masterpiece, and one so intimately dependent on language and its prismatic tenses? And *Céleste* is not even about *A la recherche du temps perdu*: its subject is not Proust himself, lying pale and precious in his littered bed, distilling the endless manuscript. No: the subject is Céleste Albaret, his faithful housekeeper - nursemaid - secretary - skivvy - nother-substitute . . . *gouvernante*, during the last eight years of his life.

And the film, like Céleste's life, is virtually confined to Proust's apartment. All we see, for the most part, is two rooms: the imperious sick-room-study, from which the bell shrills to summon Céleste from the kitchen. Hour after hour, she sits there, and we watch her, waiting, while the clock ticks. Then the ritual: hot milk, carefully poured; boiling water; the coffee filter machine; the tray; the quiet obedience to the bell. Only very briefly do we quit the apartment - for the last, sad 1914 trip to Cabourg; for reminiscences about the death of Céleste's mother at Auxillac; for lingering, yearning looks at a grey, deserted Paris. Apart from Céleste's husband, no one comes to visit until near the end. The Poulet Quartet - played here by the Bartholdy - arrive to perform César Frank's quartet in D; later, the Goncourt committee and the doctors, including Proust's brother, fuss and flutter about. Otherwise, all seems silence and devotion, service at a living shrine.

So how on earth has Percy Adlon made such a gripping film? First, by subduing our expectations, and making us attend - as the layout of poetry does when we see it on the page. The credits are deliberately stealthy. On the right of the screen, through an open doorway, we see Céleste (played by Eva Mattes) sit-

ting on her kitchen chair, a patient figure from an interior by Vermeer. On the left, the credits, punctuated by single phrases from the César Frank. Does this tell us, forbiddingly, "Art film ahead"? Hardly, but it prepares us to watch and listen intently. Then, once we accept the film's restricted space, it comes to life like a stage. As in the work of Ermanno Olmi, everyday objects and actions take on their full significance in the irrecoverable moment.

In that sense, Adlon's film is truly Proustian. At the end of it, when Proust is dead, the tired whiskey husk of Paul Helleu's deathbed etching, with the great work a scatter of scrawled paper and the world collapsed, we feel the poignant pointlessness when Céleste snips a lock of his hair to cradle in her hands. We know that the book will live for him - a monument? A kind of immortality? But we also know that Céleste never read it all: that what mattered to her was having served the man she described as "un grand seigneur" who was also a great tyrant, and a great baby, and a genius.

She waited fifty years before telling her story to Georges Belmont, who made of it the book *Monsieur Proust*, on which this film is based. A remarkable book - artful, yet truthful; faithful to Céleste, yet full of deeper resonances, informed by knowledge and love of Proust's great work. The film can only select from the storehouse: it omits, for example, the changes of address - and, most memorable for many people, the book's final story, about the opal that Proust gave Céleste, who treasured it, then one day lost it. It turned up again - in a mouthful of salad that her daughter was eating.

Proust, in *Céleste*, is played by Jürgen Arndt. He looks amazingly authentic, save in some of his movements, capering to show Céleste how people had behaved at dinner. His eyes, those brooding, hooded, boiled eyes, tell all that he felt. And Eva Mattes looks everything that can be imagined from pictures of Céleste in old age. After a while, even the German on the soundtrack ceases to seem intrusive. As a study of master and servant, feudally free with each other within the limits both accept; as a recreation of Proust and Céleste; as an evocation of past time; as a series of genre interiors - this film is a delight.

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