Coco - Two views of Chanel

Reviewed by Anne Ryan

Last year saw the sumptuous biopic 'Coco – Avant Chanel' – in which the designer was portrayed by Audrey Tautou – this year's offering is 'Coco Chanel and Igor Stravinsky' – directed by Jan Kounen and starring Mars Mikkelsen and the current Chanel muse Anna Mouglalis.

The first film concentrated on Chanel's early career, her affair with Arthur 'Boy' Capel shown for its importance in backing her work, rather than as a grand passion. And the work, written and directed by Anne Fontaine, showed Chanel as an innovator both artistically and socially – her designs based on her rejection of the role which society had assigned to her – as a poor woman.

This year's offering concentrates on the affair between two giants of modernism - the designer and the composer. Chanel offered Stravinsky a home when he had been reduced to poverty in exile in Paris – her motivation is never made clear – although it confirms her role in the artistic avant garde. But whereas Chanel rejected bourgeois society, Stravinsky relies on the support of his wife and the love of his children – whilst composing challenging works – notably for the Ballets Ruses – and he seems to expect the same traditional wifely role from Chanel.

Both films are sumptuous and beautifully costumed – but it is telling that my most lasting memory of 'Coco and Igor' is of the black and white décor of Chanel's villa. And during the sex scenes the bed linen was more impressive than the emotions.

The film is strangely passionless – Mikkelsen sleepwalks through his role and Mouglalis too often looks as though she is on the catwalk – demonstrating independence by repeatedly putting her hands in her pockets. And for realists – the physical resemblance to the actual people is minimal. The film's emotional heart lies with Yelena Morozova, playing Madame Stravinsky – who loses her husband to a more glamorous and selfish woman – as her own health declines. Committed to her marriage and her husband's creativity she endures poverty and humiliation to preserve her family.

The closing montage suggests that the love between Chanel and Stravinsky survived to their deaths – within weeks of each other – but I found the film cold. The depiction of the avant garde is interesting and absorbing – but the most moving scenes are the opening performance of 'Le Sacre du Printemps' filled with an emotion that is sadly lacking in the work as a whole – perhaps illustrating that these are two people whose passion lay in their creations.

Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky was viewed at the Cornerhouse in August 2010.