BUFFY POWER

The Last Days of Chez Nous (directed by Gillian Armstrong, written by Helen Garner); Buffy the Vampire Slayer (directed by Joss Whedon). Review by Jenni Millbank.

It's hard to imagine two films more different in style, theme and genre than The Last Days of Chez Nous and Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Chez Nous is a deliberately small-scale personal drama set in inner-city Sydney, based around the relationship between two sisters, Beth (Lisa Harrow) and Vicki (Kerry Fox). It is filled with familiar images, from the loving shots of Glebe to the scenes where Beth (having just had a tantrum) is down on her hands and knees sweeping up plates she's broken, because no-one else is going to. In contrast Buffy (Kristy Swanson) is, as the title suggests, a cheerleading LA rich girl whose unexpected mission in life is to save her home town from vampires. The whole production is a sly parody of American teen-horror flicks, full of lots of nicely choreographed action, plenty of great one-liners and probably not one jot of reality. The most bizarre conclusion from comparing these two films (I saw them within two days of each other) is the feeling that it is the lightweight Buffy, not the complex 'women's relationships' Chez Nous, which provides the more positive portrayal of women, and the more feminist underlying message.

To all appearances Chez Nous is a 'women's film'. Helen Garner (Monkey Grip) wrote the script; Jan Chapman (who worked with Garner on the ABC telemovie Two Friends, about teenage girls' friendship) produced it; and Gillian Armstrong (My Brilliant Career, High Tide and Mrs Soffel) returned to Australia from the US to direct it. It's about how a household (composed of fortyish feminist, Beth, Beth's husband JP and Beth's teenage daughter Annie) is disrupted when the precocious younger sister Vicky returns from a disastrous trip overseas. It is filled with the detail of women's everyday lives, and complex, interesting characterisations. The warning bells sounded for me when, on the eve of the screening, Helen Garner described it as a 'post-feminist' film—a statement which immediately brought to mind a postcard on display in a Sydney bookshop which responded: "I'll be post-feminist in post-patriarchy".

The story sets up Beth as a long-time feminist who is strong, independent and a successful writer. It then proceeds to demolish her life in a quietly understated way, with little sympathy for her niggling suggestion that it's all her fault because she's too tough to be truly lovable. Her independence is a brittle facade, she's too controlling, she's never really been happy—it's kind of a subtle, tertiary-educated equivalent to Fatal Attraction. When she cries no-one really cares, when she smashes things no-one moves, when her lover leaves her it's because she was 'too proud' for him to ever to get close.

Na na na, Beth, you'll have to face your midlife crisis on your own.

It could be argued that this is simply a fair portrayal of the kind of nasty behaviour middle aged straight feminists have to deal with in their relationships with 'new' men. The film, however, veers towards the implicit view that it is all really Beth's fault, and that feminism has ruined women's lives. A striking example of this is the contrast between Beth and JP's relationship and that of another couple who have a baby in the course of the story. The couple appear for only a few brief scenes. In the first, the woman tells Beth that she's having a baby and Beth blithely responds, "oh well, better luck next time". In the next, JP is crooning over the baby in the distance while Beth dismisses the importance of marriage. The couple sternly tell her that it "doesn't look good" to say this, and when Beth argues the man responds, "what have you women done to yourselves? You're husks". Distraught look on Beth's face; silence: cut to next scene. The couple appear again towards the very end of the film for dinner, watch JP yelling at Beth, shake their happy het heads sagely, and then over a tense dinner hear Beth's declaration that Cheryl (a family joke character; a rough working class 'moll') is a better woman than she is —because Cheryl at least has heart and soul.

Or take young Vicki. She's weak, manipulative, not ambitious and not a feminist; she regrets her abortion, thinks men should protect women; and she scores the all time prize of JP's amorous attention. And of course it is she, not JP, that Beth hates for it. JP can't really help himself, and he smiles at Beth a number of times in a rueful kind of way. If he hadn't been French I'm sure they would have tossed in 'C'est la vie' as his parting line.

Now I wouldn't go so far as to argue that Buffy provides a complex or thoughtful treatise on the situation of
women in post-industrial society, but I do feel it offers a more positive portrayal of women's strength than *Chez Nous*. Like the earlier, and somewhat blacker, *Heathers*, it is part of a new genre of mocking hyper-American films, which sometimes feature smart-mouthed girls as unwitting heroes. Buffy, the central character, begins as an archetypal 'airhead' who is unbelievably rich, has unbelievably rich friends and handsome boyfriend. Ambitions? To marry Christian Slater and perhaps, if a career is unavoidable, to be a buyer — although of what she is not sure; she just liked the sound of it. Her parody of femininity is too complete to be truly offensive. She's a cheerleader, she sneers at non-WASP boys, she has vast quantities of blonde hair, will almost certainly be the prom queen, she has to be truly offensive. She's a cheerleader, she sneers at non-WASP boys, she has vast quantities of blonde hair, will almost certainly be the prom queen, and won't buy a jacket because a friend scoffs that it is "so five minutes ago". Her name is Buffy for God's sake.

What is fascinating to watch is the transformation as she is told by Merrick (Donald Sutherland) that she is the "chosen one" who must single-handedly fight the vampire nation. At first she is contemptuous and disbelieving ("Get out of my facial"). Then she is pleased to discover that someone understands her dreams — dreams she had always kept secret. She's not so dumb after all. When Merrick tricks Buffy and betrays her trust she responds by punching him so fiercely that she knocks him over — and then remarks she hadn't known she was so strong, because she'd never hit anyone before. (A nice parable of female empowerment if ever I saw one.) Now that she does know her own strength, Buffy takes rather a liking to it. She works out, she jumps and kicks, she slays a few vampires — she's got a knack for this, and the camera emphasises the power of her physical work in the plentiful action scenes.

It becomes clear that Buffy doesn't fit in any more, and she's no longer happy with her old life. When her boyfriend's sleazy friend grabs her arse, as he has done on previous occasions, she responds by hurling him to the floor. We start to see her in flannelette shirts and cutoff denim shorts. At one stage a biker's offer of "something hot and powerful between your legs" is taken up; his face hits the tarmac and he roars off on his motorbike to cries of "Dyke!" from his mates. "Yo tough Buffy!" cried someone in the audience.

There are a lot of nice messages about this transformation. When Merrick complains that Buffy is the most difficult girl he has ever trained and that she "does everything wrong", he adds that it's just fine that she does it all her way. Merrick knows, and we know, that she's going to win because she's stubborn and strong. Buffy's obligatory love interest is a daggy boy, Pike (Luke Perry) who, although he tries to be of assistance, is mostly just overpowered and faint. She won't do what he tells her to do, either, so he ends up accepting his limitations and sharpens wooden stakes for her. A nice finishing touch comes when Buffy and Pike (Those names! A match made in heaven, really) go to a dance together. Pike asks defensively "I suppose you want to lead?" "No" says Buffy, "Do you?" He shakes his head, and they try to work a way around it. Cutesy perhaps, but also a striking contrast to the she's-tough-but-bows-down-to-the-man-she-loves theme of film orthodoxy.

Of course there is a gulf between the films' approaches; after all, *Buffy* is a fantasy while *Chez Nous* is making a stab at social realism. And it's always a lot easier for women to be naughty and get away with it when no-one's going to take it seriously. Still, when it comes to having a fun night out and getting an 'it's really good being a girl' feeling at the end, my vote is: go with *Buffy* and leave the post-feminists to sit at home with their insight and their AFI awards.

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