

Festivals & Seasons piece for Empire Online.

By David Parkinson

Screening in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Dundee, London and Manchester, between 20 April and 4 May, the French Film Festival celebrates its 15th anniversary with a magnificent selection of recent releases - none of which is currently due for distribution in the UK. In addition to a tribute to director Christian Vincent that includes *The Discreet* (1990), *La Séparation* (1994), *Save Me!* (2000), *The Children* (2005) and *Four Stars* (2006), the programme also includes a further 20 features in its Panorama, Discovery and Junior strands. With several actors and directors on hand to introduce their films, this is an unmissable opportunity to catch up with the latest offerings by such legendary names as Claude Chabrol, Costa-Gavras and Bertrand Blier, as well as Isabelle Huppert, Gérard Depardieu and Monica Bellucci.

The peerless Claude Chabrol marks his half-century in cinema with *A Comedy of Power*, a characteristically acerbic swipe at bourgeois ethics, in which the always compelling Isabelle Huppert excels as a magistrate, whose sudden celebrity during the investigation of a corrupt oil company enhances her fearsome reputation, while also impinging upon her personal life. With François Berléand, Patrick Bruel and Jean-François Balmer lending polished support, this is another masterly blend of teasing satire and thrilling morality from Hitchcock's most devout disciple.

The harsh world of work also preoccupies Costa-Gavras in *The Ax*, a searing adaptation of a Donald Westlake novel that sees unemployed paper executive José Garcia resort to murder in a bid to eliminate his competitors for the plum post currently occupied by Olivier Gourmet. There's plenty of gallows humour surrounding Garcia's awkward assassination attempts and wife Karin Viard's willingness to accept his increasingly eccentric behaviour. But Costa-Gavras also makes some trenchant politico-economic points about industry's obsession with the bottom line and the social ramifications of consigning robust people to the scrapheap at an ever-earlier age.

Cash-strapped Jean-Chretien Sibertin-Blanc proves similarly resourceful (but much less baneful) in pursuing his dream in Anne Fontaine's *Nouvelle Chance*. This is the third film about a bunglingly well-meaning Parisian actor - after *Augustin* and *Augustin, King of Kung-Fu* - and Fontaine displays an unsuspected gift for bittersweet comedy, as Sibertin-Blanc (her

real-life brother) solves the problem of providing a party of visiting Swedish businessmen with some typically Gallic entertainment by teaming ageing operetta star Danielle Darrieux and tele-diva Arielle Dombasle in a low-key adaptation of the correspondence between Madame du Deffand and Julie de Lespinasse.

The humour is broader, but just as genial in Fabien Onteniente's *Camping*, an ensemble romp that provides a rare glimpse into French mainstream tastes. Whether it's plastic surgeon Gérard Lanvin tolerating the vulgarity of womanising mustard salesman Franck Dubosc (after he's forced to share his tent after his flashy car breaks down *en route* to Spain), Claude Brasseur complaining about losing his usual spec to a Dutch couple or Mathilde Seigner teaching husband Antoine Dulery a lesson for his infidelity, this is a consistently amusing series of comic cuts that provides a few sly insights into human nature, as well as the odd moment of caustic class satire.

The comic truths are even more acerbic in Bertrand Blier's *How Much Do You Love Me?*, in which Bernard Campan spends his lottery winnings on luring hooker Monica Bellucci to move in with him. However, her gangster boyfriend Gérard Depardieu proves as unhappy with the arrangement as Campan's melancholic doctor pal Jean-Pierre Darrousin and his testy neighbour, Farida Rahouadj, who objects to the volume of Bellucci's faked orgasms. Blier's brand of politically incorrect provocation is something of an acquired taste. But his assertion that love springs as often from mercenary as romantic motives is sharply explored by an excellent cast that revels in the contentious material.

Blier's near-contemporary Maurice Pialat wrote the fact-based treatment that inspired Patrick Grandperret's *Meurtrières*. But Pialat's innate understanding of the outsider is very much absent from this rather predictable picaresque, in which half-Turkish Hande Kodja quits her job in a La Rochelle hotel to hook up with failed suicide, Céline Sallette. Their misadventures on the road are recorded with a detachment that dilutes any dramatic tension. But the performances are laudably committed and Grandperret captures the changing mood of his west coast locations with unfussy skill.

The atmosphere is also key to Jérôme Cornuau's *Tiger Brigades*, a spin-off from a popular 1970s TV show that was itself inspired by a troubleshooting crime unit that was established in the 1910s by Minister of the Interior, Georges Clemenceau. With its pleasingly convoluted plot and Feuillade sense of mystery, this is a rousing thriller that centres around the efforts of Clovis Cornillac to track down anarchist Jacques

Gamblin before he can disrupt the signing of a tripartite treaty between France, Russia and Britain. However, he also has to work out how drug-addled assassin Thierry Frémont, corrupt banker Philippe Duquesne and duplicitous princess Diane Kruger fit into the plot before a performance of the highly symbolic opera, *Ivan the Terrible*.

The tone is lighter, but the sense of period is equally strong in Michel Hazanavicius's *OSS 117: Cairo, Nest of Spies*, a 60s espionage spoof that splendidly deconstructs the myth of Jean Bruce's indestructible special agent, who has featured in 265 novels and seven movies since his first appearance in 1949 (four years before James Bond's). Jean Dujardin plays Hubert Bonisseur de la Bath with a knowing mix of vacuous suavity and imperialist condescension that makes his investigation into the murder of comrade Philippe Lefèbvre all the more hilariously inept. But while Hazanavicius gets plenty of mileage out of Dujardin's dismissal of everything Arab, he also throws in a couple of supremely silly running gags, keeps the twisting plot moving at a satisfying clip and establishes a great rapport between his hapless hero and Egyptian assistant, Bérénice Bejo.

The grimmer realities of France's involvement in North Africa are considered in Philippe Faucon's *The Betrayal*, which shares many of its pivotal themes with Rachid Bouchareb's humanist combat picture, *Days of Glory*. Set during the Algerian War of Independence, the action centres on Vincent Martinez, a lieutenant heading an army squadron whose Arab contingent is suspected of collusion with the local FLN rebels. But does he arrest Ahmed Berrhama and his colleagues and risk accusations of racism or ignore the evidence of a confiscated notebook and possibly imperil the entire base? Adeptly shifting between perspectives, Faucon sustains the suspense of his complex story while also drawing unobtrusive parallels between 1960s attitudes to the Muslim world and those of the present day.

Emmanuel Carrère similarly manages to bolster a lingering sense of unease in *The Moustache*, in which architect Vincent Lindon becomes increasingly unhinged after his life-changing shave goes unnoticed by everyone, including his seemingly devoted wife, Emmanuelle Devos. This is a mesmerising sleight of hand that toys with notions of perception, personality and paranoia, as Lindon struggles to accept that he's either losing his mind or his place at the centre of his own life. The Hong Kong denouement feels like a miscalculation, but Lindon excels in his uncertainty and mistrust and Devos is typically compelling in mischievously ambiguous support.

Isild Le Besco also discovers that real life isn't all it's cracked up to be in Emmanuelle Bercot's *Backstage*. Having met her pop-singing idol, Emmanuelle Seigner, after her mother wrote in to a TV surprise show, Le Besco heads for Paris and inveigles herself into Seigner's inner circle. However, she soon finds herself juggling the liggers and losers feeding off the unstable star's celebrity and has to reappraise her allegiances.

The relationship between flatmates Emmanuel Mouret and Frédérique Bel is less sinister, but no more conventional in Mouret's captivating romcom, *Change of Address*. With Mouret's French horn player besotted with student Fanny Valette and the ditzy Bel fixated on an elusive customer at her photocopy shop, the path of true love runs anything but smoothly. But once restaurateur Dany Brilliant seeks to renew his acquaintance with the taciturn Valette, there's only one way this deliciously Allenesque scenario can end.

The feel-good quotient is also high in Cédric Kahn's *The Aeroplane*, a charming tale of innocence and wonderment that recalls Albert Lamorisse's enchanting 1956 short, *The Red Balloon*. Roméo Botzaris impresses as the boy whose attachment to the last Christmas present he received from pilot father Vincent Lindon before his disappearance takes on a new significance when he becomes convinced that his model plane has a life of its own. But it's Kahn's subtle switches between juvenile fantasy and adult reality that gives this exhilarating story its buoyant optimism.

Daniel Duval's grasp of childhood insecurity is equally assured in *A Year in My Life*, a delightful memoir of his own adoption by a country couple in the mid-1950s. With an evocative score by the ever-dependable Vladimir Cosma and some glorious pastoral vistas by Claude Garnier, this paints a very different picture of rural life to that presented in such contemporary documentaries as Georges Rouquier's *Farrebique* (1946). But nine year-old Raphael Katz copes well, as he become accustomed to affable farmer Jean-Paul Rouve and his starchy wife Anne Brochet, and finds solace away from martinet teacher Denis Podalydes with Annie Girardot, a reclusive widow whom the locals are convinced is a witch. Complete with an ending to set the spirits soaring, this will make a wonderful introduction for youngsters to the endless delights of foreign-language cinema.