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# THE MAN WHO BASED ON A NOVEL BY VICTOR HUGO LAUGHS

## - SCREENINGS SCHEDULE -

DATE : 7-9-2012

Cinema hall : **SALA PERLA** - Time : 19.45

Access : Press, Industry, Professional

DATE : 08-09-2012

Cinema hall : **SALA DARSENA** - Time : 9.00

Access : Press, Industry

DATE : 08-09-2012

Cinema hall : **SALA GRANDE** (OFFICIAL SCREENING) - Time : 20.00

Access : Pubblico

DATE : 08-09-2012

Cinema hall : **PALABIENNALE** - Time : 20.00

Access : Pubblico

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## - PRODUCTION NOTES -

### FROM PAGE TO SCREEN BY WAY OF A CHILDHOOD DREAM

Back in November 1971, a three-part miniseries based on Victor Hugo's great novel, *The Man Who Laughs*, was broadcast in France. Among the many viewers gripped by Jean Kerchbron's adaptation was a 10-year-old boy. But not just any boy. One who would grow up to become a filmmaker himself — Jean-Pierre Améris.

"It really impressed me," says Améris. "It almost traumatized me." Five or six years later, he read the novel. "That completely blew me away. I had a lot of hang-ups about my height. I was 6 foot 7. So I was drawn to stories about monsters in the movies and literature. I identified with all of them — *The Elephant Man*, *Frankenstein*."

And he never forgot the character of Gwynplaine, the novel's young protagonist who is mutilated as a small child and left with a hideous scarified "grin" stretched across his face. That image haunted Améris and became a lifelong dream. "One day," he thought, "I'll make a film of that story."

It took quite a few years and many other films before the filmmaker was ready to tackle Victor Hugo and delve back into the roots of his own adolescent anxieties. "Adapting a novel doesn't mean illustrating it. You have to have a point of view," he explains. "Guillaume Laurant, my co-screenwriter, and I didn't want to do an historical reconstruction."

The novel takes place in 17th century England but Améris and Laurant chose not to pin their story down to any particular time or place. They wanted to recount a tale that might begin, "Once upon a



time, in a far off land...” Most importantly, Améris wanted to tell Gwynplaine’s story. So the screenwriters’ first job was to wrest that pared down storyline from Victor Hugo’s “baroque, surreal novel with lots of philosophical and historical digressions.” And they were determined to never lose sight of Gwynplaine.

“What I found so touching in that story was that it reflected the insecure teenager I was at the time,” Améris admits. “Gwynplaine thinks he’s ugly. He can’t imagine that he could be loved or desired. He has both a physical and a social inferiority complex. I’ve always made films about physical difference. That’s something that’s always touched me. So I wanted to focus on the story of that teenager — one that today’s teenagers might see themselves in.”

## THE GREAT MAN BEHIND THE MAN WHO LAUGHS

Victor Hugo wrote *The Man Who Laughs* between 1866 and 1869, during his political exile in the Channel Islands. The novel has been adapted to the screen

on three previous occasions but the most celebrated version is certainly Paul Leni’s breathtaking 1928 silent film starring Conrad Veidt.

“It’s really a magnificent film,” enthuses Améris. “But it’s even more unfaithful to the book than mine because Leni wasn’t allowed to keep the novel’s tragic conclusion. They forced him to tack on a Hollywood happy ending.”

Améris felt that the story Hugo actually wrote deserved to be told and disseminated. While it remains one of Victor Hugo’s most widely read novels in France, *Les Misérables* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* are better known outside the country and have been much more frequently adapted to the big screen.

“*The Man Who Laughs* was, in fact, very poorly received when it was first released in 1869, which very much affected Victor Hugo,” Améris explains. “People were very uncomfortable with that combination of tragedy and black humor. That humor is very important in the film. It’s very dark, it’s gro-





tesque.” Nevertheless, the screenwriters took some liberties in their adaptation. “I think huge fans of the book may be stunned by some of the things I cut out,” laughs Améris, who eliminated any and all narrative digressions to avoid ever losing sight of Gwynplaine.

As the film opens, the scarred child is abandoned by his keepers. He trudges off into a blizzard, where he comes upon the cadaver of a woman in the snow. However, the baby who clutches her breast is still alive. Gwynplaine takes the baby in his arms and pushes on, against the howling winds. The two “orphans in the storm” are finally taken in by Ursus, a generous vagabond who lives alone in a small caravan with his pet wolf. Ursus immediately realizes that the baby girl is blind. He christens her Dea and takes off with the two adopted children, peddling herbs and all forms of quackery.

The second act of the story jumps ahead fifteen years, when the threesome moves to the big city, takes up residence on a bustling fairground and

launches a highly successful circus act. “So Gwynplaine finds a family,” the director explains, “and thanks to his scar, he finds his place on the stage and becomes a famous clown.”

The theater is also an important theme in both the book and the film. “Hugo’s idea is that everything is theater,” Améris observes. “We don’t know where the dividing lines are. He talks about the poor and the rich, the theater and reality. Gwynplaine has trouble deciphering what’s theater and what is real. Things almost seem more real on stage for him, a little like in Jean Renoir’s *The Golden Coach*. So when he changes his milieu and moves into the aristocratic world, I tried to treat that as another kind of huge theater — even more fake, more pronounced, with monsters, people overly made-up. Everything’s theater.”

However, Améris did make one significant change from the theatrical productions in the book. He omitted Hugo’s philosophical play, *Chaos Vanquished*. “We created theater pieces that were simpler,” the



director explains. “Gwynplaine became a mime. I thought a lot about Jean-Louis Barrault in *The Children of Paradise* or Charlie Chaplin in *Limelight* or Marcel Marceau. I wanted to pay homage to that tradition.

Some of the dialogue in the film comes right out of Victor Hugo and some was written in the author’s style. “I didn’t want it to sound too contemporary but I didn’t want it to sound like big, historical dialogue either,” Améris elaborates. “Actors often speak really loud in period pieces. I’ve always hated that. I really wanted my actors to act as if they were in a contemporary film. That’s what was most important to me.”

Late in the film, Gwynplaine learns that he, in fact, comes from a great aristocratic family. He had been kidnapped and disfigured as a child in retaliation against his father, who opposed the king. Yet again, his world is turned upside down. He moves into a grand chateau and takes his seat at Parliament. The impassioned, eloquent speech he delivers on the plight of the poor, however, comes straight from the

book. “After all,” Améris reminds us, “Victor Hugo was a great political figure. It’s almost unimaginable today. He was a poet, a novelist, a playwright and a politician. He was a Royalist at first, then he took a stand against Napoleon. He was against the death penalty. He was really engaged. That’s what I love about Victor Hugo. He touches on the personal, the social, and even the metaphysical, in the sense that, for him, death transfigures everything. You have to transcend injustice, you have to be on the side of the sublime in order to make life bearable.”

## A CAST OF WOUNDED CHARACTERS

The *Man Who Laughs* is Jean-Pierre Améris’ twelfth film as a director. All twelve are about wounded people, outcasts. “I identify with them,” he says. “I take people who are cast aside and put them at the center of the screen. That’s the reason I make movies.” Gwynplaine is no exception to that rule.

“What was really wonderful about shooting at the Barrandov Studios in Prague,” he continues, “was





that we put together this troop of midgets and giants, a fat lady, a bearded lady... It was really very beautiful. It's a very protective world. At one point, Ursus advises Gwynplaine to 'never leave the stage.' That's his great piece of advice, 'Here people will love you but, in real life, they'll cause you pain.' And Gwynplaine's big mistake is that he leaves the stage for the great theater of his origins, the aristocracy, where he will suffer a great deal."

Gwynplaine clearly reigns at the center of this world of misfits. It's the story of an innocent boy — seen by others as a freak — who "has no clue as to how society functions," Améris opines. "It was also important to me that he was handsome in his own way. He's a character that everyone fantasizes about, that everyone desires. My reference was really Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands*, with Johnny Depp. I always loved that film. Because Edward's gaze is completely naïve. He doesn't understand how human relationships work. He's both dangerous and a victim. That's also why I cast Marc-André Grondin, a young leading man who's very handsome,

very elegant. I also thought about Pinocchio and all those creatures who are very candid and then plunge into the world of human beings only to discover cruelty.

In other ways, Gwynplaine is a teenager like all teenagers. He's rebellious, idealistic, constantly railing against injustice, inequality. He wants to change the world. "He provokes people," observes Améris. "When the Duchess comes to see their show for the first time, he declares, 'It's the hell of the poor that makes for the heaven of the rich.' That sublime phrase is from Victor Hugo." He's so outspoken that Ursus fears he'll be arrested for spreading subversive ideas.

When Gwynplaine subsequently discovers that he is, in fact, rich and holds a seat in Parliament, he believes he can change the world. "Even though he's seduced by the fancy clothes and wealth, he still holds onto that idea," Améris insists. "He's been manipulated by the Duchess and the chamberlain. He thinks he's lost everything. So all he's got left is his



speech to Parliament. He just wants to tell the truth, to speak in the name of the people.”

So Gwynplaine goes to Parliament. When he first takes the podium and lifts his veil, the entire assembly bursts out laughing. “That’s the tragedy of the character,” Améris continues. “When he says serious things, they laugh at him. He’s the clown. But his speech is so violent — he’s announcing a revolution of the people — that the aristocrats are ultimately terrified and simmer down.”

He turns to the Queen and says, “What they’ve done to my mouth, you’ve done to the people. They’ve been mutilated.” “That’s straight out of Victor Hugo,” says Améris. “It’s a magnificent speech. We didn’t use the whole thing but almost. And Marc-André Grondin delivers it beautifully.”

Beauty is also one of the great themes in the novel and a strong motif running through the film. “Beauty that’s personified by Dea,” observes Améris, “the little blind girl who becomes Gwynplaine’s sister and the love of his life. In this story, it’s clearly only the blind character who is able to see beauty. In Victor

Hugo, it’s not the objective gaze, it’s the soul that has the ability to recognize beauty. It’s inner beauty that matters.”

“Everything’s doubled in the film,” the director goes on to explain. “Victor Hugo was all about duality — hell and heaven, the poor and the rich, the stage and the real world. Everything’s doubled. Right down to Gwynplaine’s mask, which represents duality itself. It’s a laughing mask, a clown’s mask, and it’s a tragic mask. And beauty is essential to the story because... Where is his beauty? What is beauty? Everyone comes to see Gwynplaine because he’s such a hideous monster. Of course, beauty is always subjective and his ugliness is often more a reflection of those who make fun of him. Which, again, is one of the reasons I made this film.”

Christa Thérét, the radiant actress who plays Dea, elaborates, “Hugo was the first writer to express the beauty of the poor, of monsters. Prior to that, beauty was always considered a quality of the nobility. As my character says in the film, ‘What does ugly mean? Ugly means hurting people! You make me







feel good.’ To her, beauty is what she feels because she can’t see. So she feels people’s souls. I find that really beautiful.”

Améris first discovered Thérét in *LOL (Laughing Out Loud)*. “I thought she really had the face of a silent screen actress,” he says. “That was very important to me. This film is really a tribute to the cinema I love — Hollywood cinema, silent films. And she looked like the actresses in Charlie Chaplin’s films. I showed her *City Lights*, Edna Purviance, those huge close-ups of Lillian Gish, with her beautiful eyes... She had that face, yet with a modern twist.”

The character of Ursus, the lone wolf who becomes Gwynplaine’s and Dea’s surrogate father, is played by the indomitable Gérard Depardieu, whose titanic presence and restrained performance bring a quiet force to the film. “For the other characters, we didn’t have anyone in mind,” says the filmmaker. “But from the very beginning, Ursus was always Gérard Depardieu in my mind. It couldn’t be anyone else. It was obvious.”

In fact, Depardieu had longed to do *The Man Who*

*Laughs* for many years. Shortly after *Cyrano de Bergerac*, he actually tried to develop the project but it never came to fruition. “Back then, he wanted to play Gwynplaine,” Améris remarks, “Now he was the right age to play Ursus. As far as I was concerned, he was Ursus, the ultimate father. The man who never wanted kids yet who, in 30 seconds flat, takes in Gwynplaine and Dea, after an entire village had closed their doors to them. He’s generosity personified. He just embraces them.”

“What was wonderful about Gérard Depardieu’s performance,” Améris continues, “is that he brings a kind of youth to Ursus, who could potentially be a slightly pontificating, constantly philosophizing, imperious character — the old man who knows it all. There’s really a kind of eternal youth in Depardieu. Ursus is also a rebel. That’s Depardieu’s rebelliousness. It’s Depardieu’s freedom. I love that.”

Gérard Depardieu plays a father who does everything in his power yet remains helpless to keep sorrow from his children. “He warns them about every trap,” says Améris. “He tells Gwynplaine to never

leave the stage. He's absolutely lucid. But he's less philosophical than in the novel. I wanted Ursus to simply be a loving character who's lived life and personifies generosity."

At one particularly powerful moment during the shoot, art seemed to be imitating life. It was when they shot the scene in which Ursus watches his children die. "I think it was intense for Depardieu to play that," Améris admits. "He knows what it means to lose a son. And that's what he played. He brought an enormous amount of humanity to it. For me, it was incredibly emotional to film that man, who is a human being in the fullest sense of the term. When Gérard saw the last reel of the film, he was very moved. The last shot of the film is on Ursus, standing on the shore, lifting his hands to the heavens in a gesture of total incomprehension. When Depardieu saw that, he said, 'You can't end on me. You have to end on the kids.' I said, 'I really want to end on you.'"

The fourth principal character in the film is the Duchess. "For Victor Hugo, she was Eve," notes Améris. "In the sense of the fall from Paradise, of

temptation. That's why I really wanted to cast Emmanuelle Seigner, who brought great intelligence and finesse to the role. She wasn't just the 'evil woman.' That was really important to me." The Duchess is sexually attracted to Gwynplaine, yet unsettled by the purity of his gaze. "He looks at her as if she were an angel when, in fact, she's a perverted woman," Améris observes. "We thought a lot about the Marquise de Merteuil from *The Dangerous Liaisons*, those women who've been around and have no illusions. But she's almost as much a victim as he is. When she discovers that they come from the same world and that he, too, gets caught up in the trappings of vanity and wealth, she's almost disappointed. Toward the end of the film, we sense that she's fallen into old age and despair. It's her last love affair."

Another character essential to the novel and the film is Barkiphedro, the chamberlain, who's played by the great theater actor Serge Merlin. When Gwynplaine returns, he comes out of the closet. And he'll do anything to keep Gwynplaine from going back to his itinerant performer lifestyle. "If he does, it's back into the closet for Barkiphedro," says Améris. "He's







a manipulator. He convinces Gwynplaine that Ursus and Dea have gone away. But even he, too, ultimately feels the suffering of others. That's the greatness of Victor Hugo. Everything is human. Humanity. Whether they're good or bad is beside the point. Hugo doesn't judge. He's on the side of suffering. His is a universe of suffering."

## MODERN ECHOES

"The genius of writers like Victor Hugo is that they're completely timeless," Améris observes. "I wanted to free this story from its historical framework, so people wouldn't say, 'Oh, it's just a story about the 17th century and England.' No, it absolutely speaks to the present, to the timelessness of humanity, which is fragile, idealistic, corruptible — pure and impure.

"It's a cult novel and the basis of a lot of contemporary cult mythology," remarks Améris. Indeed, comic book artists Jerry Robinson and Bob Kane openly acknowledge the fact that Gwynplaine inspired the character of The Joker in the *Batman* graphic

novels. We see excerpts from the silent version of *The Man Who Laughs* in Brian De Palma's *The Black Dahlia*. "It's a very American kind of story, almost like *Citizen Kane*," Améris notes. "Because it's a story about a character's social rise and fall, which is typically American."

The director sought out actors who had very contemporary qualities for the roles of Gwynplaine and Dea, a little like Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes in Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*.

Améris first spotted Marc-André Grondin in the film *C.R.A.Z.Y.* "I saw right away that he had something of the character," the director recalls. "And, most importantly, a beautiful gaze. There was a purity in his gaze, that sense of wonder, that candor. That was really essential."

Then the crew went about building a contemporary Gwynplaine, "a little like in a comic book," says Améris. "We talked about his jeans, we talked about his jacket, his look — a little like Jim Morrison or Kurt Cobain or even Robert Smith from The Cure. Rock was really our point of reference; it was very

present.” But for the director, it’s Victor Hugo’s political and social points of view that make it so contemporary. “Gwynplaine talks about unemployment, he decries the exhaustion of the poor,” he says. “You could make that speech anywhere in the world today, against the banks, the profiteers. That’s the timelessness of Victor Hugo. What was valid in 1869 is, unfortunately, valid in 2012. It’s the cry of the people. And what’s great is that it’s still theater. We had the theater of the fairground, the theater of the aristocracy and now we have the theater of politics. Politics is a form a theater. That’s also the tragedy of Victor Hugo — it’s all an act. But Gwynplaine never understood that.”

## CREATING AN ENTIRE UNIVERSE

“To make a film you have to have a strong point of view,” Améris reiterates. “After the success of *Romantics Anonymous*, everybody said, ‘Make another comedy.’ And I turn up with *The Man Who Laughs*, which ends with a double suicide! You have

to have a real need to make something like that. And a strong point of view.” “I’m not a history buff. My motivation to make this film was personal,” the filmmaker continues. “But what motivated me as a director was creating an entire universe. I really wanted to recount a fairy tale that takes place in a universe we could create from scratch. We built the fairgrounds, the chateau, the riverbanks, we shot blue screen — all those conventions that you can only create in a studio. There’s something about watching a film that’s shot entirely in a studio, knowing it’s all fake, that sends a shiver up your spine.”

So Améris and his team went about creating that world — from costumes to sets to music. His influences were vast. Améris talks about the writings of Edgar Allan Poe; Russian, English, Eastern European and Flemish painting; Anglo-Saxon cinema; fantasy films; the films of Andrei Tarkovsky and Fellini; Tim Burton’s *Sweeney Todd* and *Sleepy Hollow*.

He and costume designer Olivier Beriot took particular liberties with the period costumes. “I really wanted teenagers today to see themselves in the cha-





racters of Gwynplaine and Dea,” declares Améris. “So we had to have an element in the costumes that was a little grunge — a little Kurt Cobain, Jim Morrison, a little rock star. And we were pretty audacious. Gwynplaine actually wears jeans. They’re distressed jeans but jeans nonetheless.”

“The opportunity to work on a film that’s shot 90% in a studio is fabulous,” enthuses production designer Franck Schwarz. “You get to create everything. It’s a blank page.”

The art department did eight weeks of pre-production work in Paris then flew to the Barrandov Studios in Prague, where they spent seven weeks building the first set, alone — the fairgrounds. “We took a 21,000 square foot studio and filled it with dirt, about 20 caravans, tents... We built everything,” Schwarz continues.

They actually built two versions of The Green Box, as Victor Hugo called it — the caravan that Ursus, Gwynplaine and Dea both live and perform in — a life-size model for exterior scenes and a larger-scale model for interiors and the troop’s theatrical performances.

“Then we did the chateau,” says Schwarz. “Jean-Pierre wanted the chateau to be gigantic and to look like a tomb — a magnificent tomb. That meant a gigantic bedroom, a gigantic reception hall, a never-ending corridor. In the end, we created a sort of all-in-one with adjustable walls.”

“One thing I was committed to from the very beginning,” Schwarz confides, “was not to fall into the anecdotal. But to always try to go to the heart of Victor Hugo’s novel and Jean-Pierre’s vision. To keep it very pure.”

Améris also wanted music to play an important role in the film. “It’s a 90-minute film with 55 minutes of music,” he says. “That’s quite a bit. And the music really participates in the action.” Among his musical influences were the films of Alfred Hitchcock. “Bernard Hermann’s scores are part of those films. I wanted the music to be instrumental to the ambiance, the mystery, the emotion, the romanticism. A little like in an opera.”

He worked with Czech composer Stéphane Moucha to that end. The symphonic score, which was inspired by the 20th century music of Ligeti, Shostakovich and Gustav Mahler, was recorded by a 65-piece orchestra in London. “Mahler’s music was very important to me when I was young,” says Améris, “because it combines the sublime and the grotesque, which is very appropriate to the black humor in *The Man Who Laughs*.”

Another challenge was coming up with Gwynplaine’s “smile.” In the 1928 version of the film, Conrad Veidt had rubber bands inside his mouth that pulled out his cheeks to reveal his teeth. “I didn’t want that,” Améris declares. “I wanted a child who had been scarred. They’d cut him open with a scalpel on each side of his mouth to make him look like a clown.” So the highly skilled makeup and special effects crew set to work on that, taking a mold of Marc-André Grondin’s face and developing it over a period of several months.

Once the mask was done, Grondin had to spend 3 hours in makeup every morning. “Wearing a mask creates a distance with the other actors,” Améris confides. “Marc-André seemed frustrated at times. He was putting so much emotion into it but his mask just kept smiling. He finally realized that what he was experiencing was exactly what the character was going through. Gwynplaine is suffering on the inside but smiling on the outside.”

## LOVE WITH A CAPITAL L

“The relationship between Gwynplaine and Dea, for me, is absolute love,” the director states in no uncertain terms. What begins as the love between siblings gradually develops into romantic love. “She feels desire for him, he feels desire for her. But in Gwynplaine’s mind, that’s impossible. He thinks, ‘She’s blind. If she could see me, she’d find me repulsive and wouldn’t love me.’ He can’t get past that. And that’s what causes all their problems.”

So Gwynplaine allows himself to be distracted by the Duchess, whose interest in him is purely carnal. That plunges him into a state of emotional and

sexual confusion. Once she's done with him, he launches himself into the political realm, only to be rejected by the Parliament, as well. And finally, once he's lost everything, he comes to his senses. Gwynplaine returns to the fairgrounds only to discover that his actions have shattered Dea's heart and driven her to take arsenic. They are reunited for a brief moment — just long enough for each of them to declare their undying love for one another. And the moment she leaves her body, he leaps into the river and joins her in death.

"It's a sublime death," Améris asserts, "a little like the last act of the great operas. All the heroines die. In *La Traviata*, she dies. In *La Bohème*, she dies. Madame Butterfly dies. I really wanted to make it like an opera."

Like those tragic operas, *The Man Who Laughs* recounts the story of a transcendental love that is perhaps too great for the confines of life on this earth. And the film's final glorious images illustrate the ultimate trajectory of Gwynplaine's journey. He floats deeper and deeper into that dreamlike expanse of

water until he is completely transfigured by the radiant light pouring from Dea's rapturous face. Freed from the shackles of an unjust society and the physical and emotional handicaps that life has presented them with, Gwynplaine and Dea are finally united in pure love — one that transcends life itself.

"It shouldn't be sad," the director insists. "It should be overwhelming. Just like an opera. It's a sublime death, a transcendental death. Yet, it's consoling. Because it's not really death. They're moving on, toward something else."



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