Handsome young general Armand de Montriveau has searched across the seas for the woman he fell in love with five years ago. He finally finds Antoinette, the Duchess of Langeais, living chastely in a Moorish convent...

It was love at first sight for Montriveau upon meeting Antoinette, a married coquette who frequents the most extravagant balls of 1820s Restoration Paris, where hypocrisy and vanity reign. Flattered by his attentions, the alluring Antoinette orchestrates a captivating game of seduction, but she repeatedly refuses Montriveau. Despite his sincere romantic declarations, Montriveau’s passion remains unfulfilled. When the humiliated Montriveau eventually seeks his revenge, Antoinette’s love awakens. But it may well be too late for the star-crossed lovers.

CAST

Antoinette de Langeais
Jeannine Balibar
Armand de Montriveau
Guillaume Depardieu
Princesse de Blamont-Chauvry
Bulle Ogier
Vidame de Pamiers
Guillaume Depardieu
Le Duc de Grandlieu
Barbet Schroeder

CREW

Mise en scene
Jacques Rivette
Adaptation
Jacques Rivette, Pascal Bonitzer, Christine Laurent
Based on
"Die Herzogin von Langeais" by Honore de Balzac
Photography
William Joubtchaney
Sound
Fiamma Edenbenz
Set Design
Manu de Chauny
Costumes
Mara Rhedian-Levy
Editing
Nicole Loubetchaney
Producers
Pierre Grise Productions (France), CINEMUNDICI (Italy)

JACQUES RIVETTE

Le coup du biberon (short) • Paris nous appartient • La Religieuse • Jean Roudor Le Patron • L’Amour fou • Out ! • Nolus metange • (duration 124min - co-directed with Suzanne Schiffman)

JEANNE BALIBAR

Ne touchez pas la hache by Jacques Rivette • Faurais voulu être un danseur by Alain Balier • Call me Agostino by Christine Laurent • Clean by Olivier Assayas • Code 46 by Michael Winterbottom • Salama by Jean-Claude Biette • Je vais voir monsieur by Danièle Dubroix • 17 fois Cecile Cassand by Christophe Honoré • Une affaire privée by Guillaume Nicloux • Avec tout mon amour by Amélie Escrivà • Va savoir by Jacques Rivette • Le stade de Wimpole by Mathieu Amalric • La comédie de l’innocence by Raoul Ruiz • Ça ira mieux demain by Jeanne Louprie • Base by Benoît Jacquot • Trois points sur la ligne by Jean-Claude Biette • Fin d’Août début septembre by Olivier Assayas • Mange ta soupe by Mathieu Amalric • Fai horreur de l’amour by Laurence Fonteyne-Soaara • Dior se la prête by Bruno Podalydès • Comment je me suis disputé (ma vie sexuelle) by Arnaud Desplechin

GUILLAUME DEPARDIEU

Le duchesse de Langeais" by Honoré de Balzac

SYNOPSIS

It was love at first sight for Montriveau upon meeting Antoinette, a married coquette who frequents the most extravagant balls of 1820s Restoration Paris, where hypocrisy and vanity reign. Flattered by his attentions, the alluring Antoinette orchestrates a captivating game of seduction, but she repeatedly refuses Montriveau. Despite his sincere romantic declarations, Montriveau’s passion remains unfulfilled. When the humiliated Montriveau eventually seeks his revenge, Antoinette’s love awakens. But it may well be too late for the star-crossed lovers.
Martine Marignac: How did you approach adapting Balzac’s short story *La Duchesse de Langeais*?

Jacques Rivette: Our first decision was to be faithful not only to the spirit but also to the letter of Balzac’s text. Whatever happens between the Duchess and General Armand de Montriveau... a particular time, the Restoration. Very early on, we decided to stick as close as possible to the context of the story.

Pascal Bonitzer: Yes, staying faithful to Balzac, unlike Giraudoux’s script for the film by Jacques de Baroncelli (made in 1941, starring Edwige Feuillère and Pierre-Richard Willm) which, in the end, told a totally different story than the one Balzac had written.

M.M.: It has to be said that none of the Duchess’s arguments for rejecting Armand can be stripped of their political context and adapted to modern times.

J.R.: Quite so. From the very beginning, our aim, even if it may seem fanciful, was to transpose Balzac’s writing into the grammar of film. His writing plays on contradictory forces that generate a kind of system of contained explosions. Long sentences interspersed with parentheses, surprising changes of speed, a way of recounting events almost by missing out the most important things. That’s why Balzac has to be read word by word. It’s three-dimensional writing.

M.M.: Although the adaptation is faithful to Balzac’s text, dialogue was needed for scenes that weren’t in his short story.

P.B.: Actually, there aren’t that many. The only thing we added - and the idea comes from Christine Laurent - is the small scene in the servants’ quarters. In the book, the servants probably have a lot to say but they keep their own counsel. Everything else - the dinner conversations between Montriveau and his friends, for example - is taken from other texts Balzac wrote around the same period. He called them “physiologies” because they dealt with the mores and clichés of the period.

M.M.: A few words about Jeanne Balibar and Guillaume Depardieu...?

J.R.: We broke with usual practice by not looking for actors to play the leads, but by writing a project for Jeanne and Guillaume, for which we didn’t yet have funding. There was a desire to make a film around them facing off. After considering the whole of Western literature, we once more came down to Balzac, with the only condition for this choice, as we said earlier, being respect for his story.

M.M.: And the title, Don’t Touch The Axe?

J.R.: Actually, that was the short story’s original title. It was only ten years later that Balzac changed it with a view to including it in his Human Comedy collection, in which this story is the centerpiece of the Treize (Thirteen) trilogy, between *Ferragus* and *La Fille Aux Yeux d’Or*.

P.B.: The trilogy deals with a secret society called the Treize, but in an elliptical way. They are never in the foreground, which is very fitting for a secret society. From time to time, they come out of hiding to perform some glorious deed of derring-do. And sometimes, they arrive too late, as in *La Fille Aux Yeux d’Or*. The notion of being “too late” underpins Don’t Touch The Axe. The role of time is an essential element in the story.

M.M.: You mentioned staying faithful to Balzac’s writing. His sentences are similar to long takes, one of your trademarks as a filmmaker.

J.R.: It’s amazing to think that Balzac is a writer I had great difficulty reading. I tried for over thirty years without getting anywhere! In the early 50s, Rohmer had said to me, “If you want to make movies, there are two writers you need to read - Balzac and Dostoyevsky.” I came to Dostoyevsky very late. As for Balzac, I “discovered” him one sleepless night when I came across Une Ténébreuse Affaire. That novel converted me and opened the lock to the rest of his work.

M.M.: The serial element is one of the fascinating things about Balzac’s work.

J.R.: It was a very gradual development. He first used characters from previous stories when he was writing *Le Père Goriot*. According to legend, at the time, he wrote his sister a letter, exclaiming, “My dear friend, I’m becoming a genius!” Whether the anecdote is true or not, what it says is true! During the shoot, I was particularly aware of the very elliptical, brutal nature of our work. What we were trying to do with this text was not an adaptation, even less an illustration. It was, if I can put it like this, a “compression”, like one of those sculptures by César (French sculptor, 1921-98).