LA BELLE ÉPOQUE
François Kraus AND Denis Pineau-Valencienne

DANIEL
AUTÉUIL
GUILLAUME
CANET
DORIA
TILLIER
FANNY
ARDANT

FESTIVAL DE CANNES
OUT OF COMPETITION
2019 OFFICIAL SELECTION

LA BELLE ÉPOQUE

A FILM BY
NICOLAS BEDOS

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Victor, sixtysomething, has his life turned upside down the day that Antoine, a flourishing entrepreneur, offers him a unique new brand of entertainment. Using a combination of theatrical artifice and historical re-enactment, his company gives its clients the opportunity to delve back into the period of their choice. Victor decides to relive the most memorable week of his existence, 40 years earlier, when he met the love of his life...
How did the idea for La Belle Époque come about?

It was an image in my mind’s eye, or rather a situation that I found at once pathetic and comical: I imagined a guy getting on in years, at home arguing with his wife. She’s criticizing him for his lack of sociability, his inability to move with the times, with technology, with Macron, with his children, and so on. So, the guy walks out of the kitchen, down the hall, and goes into a little room where everything — from the interior decoration to the LPs to the old VHS tapes — takes him back to the 1970s. It’s like a protective bubble he’s made for himself where he can regress. I could picture him lighting up a Gauloise, ogle a talk-show hostess on an old TV in a wooden cabinet and heave a sigh of relief. That was the image: a man who flounders in the present and takes refuge in a period whose codes reassure and protect him. I wanted to film the vertigo I sometimes feel around me, this psychological defeat and its antidote, at once ludicrous and very moving. It dawned on me that this image held cinematographic promise and plenty of satire. All the more as this man came to me as a reflection of a few people close to me, my father a little bit, and in some ways, myself. So, I had plenty to play with. Because the rest was a real screenwriting adventure. A psychoanalytical one, as well!

So, there’s quite an autobiographical side to the screenplay?

Yes and no, as for my previous film. The stories I tell are entirely made up. That’s what I do, but it’s also what I enjoy. In the past, I indulged in self-fiction a lot, in my television columns and in a few books, to the point of creating a degree of confusion that I grew tired of. This film is a work of fiction. On the other hand, I need to have an intimate feel for the characters, their personality, their emotions, everything. Over the months, I jotted down plot ideas, but I was waiting on pins and needles for the one that would enable me to tackle as many personal issues as possible. This for a very simple reason: it lends meaning and substance to the two years of work it takes to make a film.
What for you is the ideal balance between fiction and reality?

I'd have trouble saying. If a scene doesn’t touch on anything that affects me personally, I tend to turn away from it. If it merely reproduces a true-life episode, it doesn’t do anything for me, either. The mise-en-abyme is particularly blatant when it comes to the characters played by Doria and Guillaume.

I wrote those scenes like a sort of letter of apology after my moody outbursts on the set of Adelman. But aside from that rather trivial aspect, the story of this couple mainly gave me the opportunity to broach the theme of narcissistic transference found in some directors, who since the beginning of the cinema have mixed up their own fiction with reality, to the point of only loving an actress (or actor) through their camera lens. Some great names from the Nouvelle Vague in particular come to mind. Guillaume and Doria are also a less cerebral, more carnal and more neurotic mirror for the couple formed by Daniel and Fanny.

You seem to be exploring the passage of time and the importance of memories that was already present in Mr. & Mrs. Adelman...

Without comparing myself to Marcel Proust, ever since I was very young I’ve had a pathological fear of feelings fading away, of memories disappearing, and all that. There’s a terror of falling out of love that runs through my three plays and two films. I’m searching – in vain – through fiction for ways to recover the intensity of a memory, for tricks that would enable us to reconcile all these fragments of experience that we are all made up of.

In La Belle Époque, you deal with a form of societal nostalgia that was absent from Mr. & Mrs. Adelman. What made you develop it here?

Because I notice it all around me, even among the most fervent progressives, some of whom are really totally at sea. The gradual disappearance of political Manicheism – confirmed by Macron’s election – runaway technological progress, the growing scarcity of major popular television programs and therefore a degree of collectively shared culture, all that is somewhat unsettling and provokes reflexes that tend to be, if not reactionary, at least nostalgic. Everything Auteuil gripes about in the film are things I’ve found myself saying or have heard around me. Not that the film takes up anything that affects me personally, I tend to turn away from it. If it merely reproduces a true-life episode, it doesn’t do anything for me, either. The mise-en-abyme is particularly blatant when it comes to the characters played by Doria and Guillaume.

In fact, by trying to recover some respect and desire in the past, he finds the strength to join the present. He even ends up coming to terms with the media he despised only two weeks earlier. His physique and way of dressing changes throughout the film. That is where Daniel was incredible. I wanted to film the mental and physical rebirth of a man who was weary, disoriented, bitter, doomed to oblivion, to give him back his smile and his charm using all the means at my disposal, and those available to Canet’s character.

Indeed, how do you discuss the opposition between yesterday’s and today’s world without lapsing into the conservative “things-were-better-before” rhetoric?

The way Fanny Ardant does at the very end of the film: by pointing out all the social and intellectual drawbacks of the 1970s! When she reminds him that people weren’t all that free, that they, too, listened to crap in ponderous TV shows, that rape went unpunished and women couldn’t have abortions, objectively she’s right. The film merely describes the nostalgia of a vulnerable man, his yearning for a time when the book-lover that he is (Victor is a cartoonist) saw more people turning the pages of a novel, a newspaper or a comic and actually talking to each other rather than texting Gifs. And I must admit that I was also drawn to the purely cinematographic appeal of the 1970s. As a viewer, I’m more and more hungry for storybook and visual films. I make movies that I would probably go see and in which I feel comfortable. A certain visual and narrative “elsewhere.”

This “elsewhere” is made possible by Antoine’s company, which gives its clients the opportunity to immerse themselves in a period of the past that they want to experience or relive.

Yes, the idea came to me because I’ve reached my own saturation level with the constant increase in the number of television series, as if “standard” fiction, in other words, images on a screen, no longer impacted viewers enough. I imagined this theatrical reenactment company that would physically immerse the viewer in the story. Not at all as sophisticated as “Black Mirror,” for instance. Here, Antoine’s innovation relies on a set, props, documentation, and actors. I just wanted to show what went on backstage, a place familiar to me since I was child. It enabled me and my crew to highlight the craft aspect of moviemaking and the theater. Dressers, set designers, stage hands, assistants, actors, and so on: the film shows a crew at work. It was particularly delightful to be able to include crew members in certain shots. I watched them enjoy making the film. To the point that we had trouble parting on Friday evenings: we’d party on the sets we had designed ourselves.
La Belle Époque opens with a 19th century dinner that sets the tone: the film will play with the audience throughout.

I try to make films that I’d want to see. The idea of a beginning that has nothing to do – either in terms of tone, period or genre – with what the audience thinks they have come to see amused me like a kid. For this “Napoleonic” prologue, we even used different lenses and different focal lengths. The editing espouses the rather pompous style of a Netflix blockbuster. The main idea was to make the audience feel the same mental discomfort that Victor does and get them to identify with this guy who doesn’t really understand what he’s just watched on a tablet. What his son produces leaves him totally in the dust. At one point, I was even planning to play the son myself! (Laughter)

Except that unlike in Mr. & Mrs. Adelman, you don’t act, and you’ve focused solely on the direction. Was it a decision from the start?

I loved acting and directing at the same time because it allows you to be totally immersed in a scene. You can orient it from within, by your performance, by the way you look at your fellow players. But for La Belle Époque, I wanted to take better advantage of my technical crew. Acting takes me away from them. And the screenplay tackles such personal themes that I didn’t want to add my presence on screen. It would’ve been pleonastic! Prior to shooting, Guillaume was afraid that the fact he was playing Antoine would leave me frustrated and create tensions, given the fact that I could’ve played him myself. But as soon as the shoot began, we both thoroughly enjoyed creating the character. He put a lot of himself into it, which enriches the film without locking it into a sort of self-fiction.

Why did you want him on board?

Because he’s good! The fact that he’s a director himself was another decisive factor. Antoine’s everyday preoccupations, his outbursts of impatience and all that is very familiar to him and he was able to exploit that. And he’d expressed the desire to work with me. I try to surround myself with people who are motivated, enthusiastic and full of good will both in front of and behind the camera, because financial and time constraints sometimes make shooting days difficult and stressful. The fact that we appreciated each other and had respect for one another was a huge time-saver. Enthusiasm is something that matters a lot to me.

Let’s keep talking about your cast. Why did you choose Daniel Auteuil to portray Victor?

He was an obvious choice. I needed an actor with whom the public would easily identify right from the start. And the script constantly goes back and forth between comedy and drama, sometimes in the same scene. Rare are those actors who can navigate this mix of tones. Daniel has worked with Claude Sautet and André Techiné, two directors I place at the top of my pantheon of French cinema. So I knew he would stick to the lines, the silences, and the ambivalent relations between characters that were written in the script. I was also looking for a man whose “mature” age would nevertheless not make the return to his youth and the tight-fitting suits of the 1970s seem either pathetic or ridiculous. An ageless man who would make us believe he could fall in love with a very young woman without it ever seeming lascivious or commonplace. I must say that Daniel surpassed all hopes I’d put in this character. We were all amazed on a daily basis by the involvement of this great actor on the shoot. I felt like I was watching him...
find new enjoyment in his craft. Daniel loved Victor: each line resonated with him. To such an extent that we shared some very powerful moments of laughter, but also of tears.

Was it obvious that you would work with Doria Tillier again after Mr. & Mrs. Adelman?

There’s no doubt that she enormously inspired her own character. I’d have been an ingrate to give it to anyone else! (Laughter) Unlike in Adelman, which portrayed a literary and cerebral Sarah, this time I chose to emphasize Doria’s sensuality. Margot is much more impulsive and carnal. Our relationship was considerably pacified on the set. We’re getting to know each other! Doria totally abandons herself because she knows we have similar tastes and that she won’t regret the result.

Let’s talk about the last member of the principal quartet in La Belle Époque, Fanny Ardant...

One of the only prerequisites for the screenplay I wanted to write was that it had to have a rich enough role for Fanny, whom I’ve been fortunate enough to frequent for a number of years. I’m mad about this woman whose poetic disposition, eccentricity, humor and fragility fill me with enthusiasm. On the shoot, Fanny wasn’t always at peace with her character: she had trouble with her unwarranted nastiness, and I constantly had to remind her how much Marianne’s outward harshness was rooted in her fear of decline and death. Marianne criticizes Victor’s rejection of the future because it is slowly smothering her. Her perfidy in the early part of the film is an act of rebellion; she’s gasping to survive. The advantage of Fanny’s anxious attitude toward Marianne at first is that she put twice as much emotion and talent in loving her character at the end.

The film constantly walks a tightrope between deep melancholy and a tone tending toward sarcasm. Was it hard to keep up this balancing act from beginning to end?

No, because that tone is spontaneously mine. A kiss, a dig. Rightly or wrongly, a degree of self-restraint prompts me to counterbalance a sincere burst of lyricism that I’ve just indulged in a few seconds earlier. Doria is a bit like that, too. So are most people close to me. Nothing turns me off like constant sarcasm, either at the table or on the screen. On the other hand, when emotion manages to survive a defensively ironic retort or a spurt of jibes, I think it ends up being more powerful. Audiences understand that they haven’t been made fools of, that their arm hasn’t been twisted to make them cry. By the same token, I often ask actors to express a tenderness or an emotion belied by the content of their lines.

How did you construct the visual atmosphere of La Belle Époque with Nicolas Bolduc, your cinematographer since Mr. & Mrs. Adelman?

Nicolas had to deal with several different styles of lighting and framing, because it quickly seemed fitting to shoot the scenes situated in the present with a hand-held camera so as to convey Victor’s anxiety about progress, and everything shot in the studio would be done with broad, gentle camera movements, because he was back in familiar territory. Nicolas and Philippe, the head electrician, devised a system that enabled them to go from day to night, or from cheerfulness to sadness, in a few seconds. The great thing about Victor’s knowing everything was fake was that we could create very poetical nights and “suns” bordering on the unreal, by slipping in lots of color. On the other hand, the character played by Guillaume is so obsessed with detail and historical accuracy that the period scenes, especially those in the château, were lit entirely by candlelight, with no effects whatsoever. All the costumes were period, to the great delight of my producers. (Laughter) It all follows a rather obvious process. The fact that I write by dictating the screenplay aloud into a dictaphone enables me to remain totally focused on the mental images that generally come to me in a fairly precise manner. The task of turning it all into a script breakdown then usually takes a few weeks during which I compare my point of view with that of the continuity girl, my first AD and the cinematographer. I sometimes jotted down our differences, but on the whole, I shot the film the way I’d imagined it well before shooting began. Writing for me has always been a solitary endeavor and I have trouble sharing the paternity of a camera movement or frame. That’s also why I partly compose the score: I take the risk of being responsible for what I offer the audience. If someone hates a scene, they can’t blame anyone but me! (Laughter)

How did you compose the score?

I had asked for a piano to be set up in the café in the film, as part of the set design, and I played it often during technical setups or on breaks. That’s where I came up with several of the themes used in film. Other themes were composed by Anne-Sophie Versnaeyen, a violinist who orchestrated the score for Adelman. Our difficulty was to constantly hover between emotion and irony to stick with the tone of the film. Same for the songs that were played in the bar. How much lyricism could we get away with? That’s why Billie Holiday, for instance, seemed ideal. Her rendition of The Man I Love carries emotion very subtly, it’s never over the top.
Did you feel more comfortable on the set of this film than on your first film?

Not really. I feel like I lost any new-gained confidence very quickly in the face of the project’s ambition, issues related to the sets, and all these actors, some of whom intimidated me. And I couldn’t use my actor intonations to orient the other actors. On top of it, my crew was convinced that if I didn’t act, we’d save time on the set, but that wasn’t always true, because being so focused on the details of every take and the actors’ performance can trigger fits of perfectionism that you have to be wary of!

In any event, I remain a hard worker, as I was when preparing my columns. Anxiety drives you to work hard.

There’s an area where you don’t compromise: sticking to the dialogue...

Yes, because normally the lines were thought through enough (including in terms of the naturalness of delivery) during the writing process so that improvising could only do harm. But I have nothing against more spontaneous shooting methods, and maybe I’ll use them one day on a project that lends itself to it.

In La Belle Époque, there’s only one scene adorned with improvisation: the one in which Antoine is yelling at Margot and is particularly horrible to her. Guillaume found it remarkably fun to play! (Laughter)

Was La Belle Époque rewritten very much during editing?

Not very much. The screenplay already indicated alternating sequences, ellipses, and so on, which in fact makes for rather tedious reading. Since we worked on the narrative structure early on, when it came time to edit, we were able to focus on the choice of takes, a look, a silence, an acceleration: what I call the “subtleties.” My editor and I could do 15 versions of a scene with simple shot/reverse shots by varying the rhythm or the choice of looks almost imperceptibly. Then we tried to narrow things down. Actually, the editing could have gone on forever, because there’s always a song that works better on such and such a line or an ellipsis you want to try out. But the time to stop working is dictated by a sort of intellectual exhaustion: when you start repeating yourself and cutting a scene that you put back the next day, you know it’s time to stop.
INTERVIEW

DANIEL AUTEUIL

What made you want to accept your role in La Belle Époque?

First of all, I wanted to meet the young director whose first film, Mr. & Mrs. Adelman, proved that he had something original to say, and that he could tackle it with inspiration and a great deal of ambition. Then, when I read the screenplay for La Belle Époque, I was immediately impressed by the way he treated nostalgia and toyed with this longing through the prism of my character’s quest to win back the only feelings that are truly eternal: feelings of love. With this film, Nicolas brilliantly recounts how, despite the passage of time, deep down we never change. I firmly believe this. The power of his Belle Époque comes from the way a young man like himself perceives a period he never knew himself but that he feels nostalgic for nonetheless. It’s an extremely personal film, moving but never maudlin, and it manages to speak to everyone. On top of it, he was offering me the chance to reunite with Fanny (Ardant). So, I enthusiastically accepted his offer.

How would you describe Victor, the character you play?

This is a man who is completely out of synch with the times and, to some extent, he wants everything to stop. He’s had such incredible experiences, professionally as a cartoonist and personally because he’s known what it is to love passionately, that he’s convinced nothing will ever be as intense. Victor feels like he’s fallen by the wayside. But by choosing to relive a crucial moment in his life through time travel, he realizes that the only thing that’s really mattered all along is the moment he met the woman he married. To interpret Victor, I worked with two emotions at once: disenchantment and hope rekindled when all seems lost. A tiny little spark is all it takes to relight the fire. What I like about him is that he’s truly going to fall in love with the actress playing his wife in this reenacted past. He remains the same person despite the passage of time. There’s a Johnny Hallyday song that says, “Men don’t change, men grow older.” I identify with that.

How is Nicolas Bedos on a set?

He’s at once precise and sensitive. The way he directs his actors is never cumbersome or annoying for an old actor like myself. (laughs) And he’s highly intelligent, he has taste and his intuitions are right on the mark. You sense right away that you’re dealing with a true director. And that’s not so common… With La Belle Époque, Nicolas delivers a very cinematographic film in the true sense of the term, a film with mise en scène. But also, and above all, it’s a film made by a guy who has a true love of actors. When someone looks at you with that degree of enthusiasm and passion, a form of trust settles in that naturally enables you to let go.

If, like Victor, you were offered the chance to relive a day or specific period of your past, what would you choose?

I think I’d choose to relive it all over again. Because it really wasn’t half bad… (laughs)
What made you want to accept your role in La Belle Époque?

I’ll start by saying that I really enjoyed Mr. & Mrs. Adelman. The way Bedos directed his actors but also, and maybe especially, I loved the way he wrote the story and directed the film. Everything showed he had the makings of a true director. So, when Nicolas offered me a role in La Belle Époque, first, I was flattered, because I know how sharp his critical eye is. I was delighted to find out that he liked me and wanted to work with me. But in all honesty, I was afraid we wouldn’t get along. Knowing his temperament and mine, I was afraid sparks might fly. I told him so right away and he reassured me. But I was also totally wild about the script and how Nicolas treats nostalgia. I myself am a rather nostalgic person. I’m very distressed by the way of life we’ve chosen as a society. We’re increasingly reliant on our cellphones and the Internet. For instance, we no longer bother to use our memories when we need to find something. I’m not hostile to progress, but I’m nostalgic for the period Nicolas depicts and that the character Victor wants to relive; a period when our relationship to time was so different. Actually, everything that takes me back to my childhood moves me. That’s probably why his screenplay, aside from the fact that it’s very well written, had such an effect on me.

Could you describe your character and tell us how he resonates with you?

Of course, he’s also a part of why I wanted to embark on the adventure. I see him as a mix between Nicolas and me in his way of being hard to please and demanding with himself and others. As a result, I didn’t have to dig very deep to create him. During the shoot, it amused me immensely to watch Nicolas’ behavior on the set. It fed my inspiration... (laughs)

How does Nicolas Bedos handle his sets? What are his main qualities when directing his actors?

Before working with him, I imagined a director who enjoyed conflictual relationships. What happened was exactly the opposite! I was in the presence of a filmmaker who was very attentive and considerate of his actors, and he proved to be very benevolent in his approach to everyone’s work. You can immediately sense his desire to put you in the best light and make you give the very best of yourself, but in a very warm working environment. And he has another huge quality in my opinion. Nicolas is straight with people, which is a huge time-saver. He immediately says what doesn’t suit him. He doesn’t beat around the bush. He’s extremely precise, a true conductor. He lives and breathes his film day in, day out. And his love of his work gives him an energy that uplifts everyone on the set.

Speaking of which, how would you describe the way in which Nicolas Bedos treats nostalgia?

His irony, his unapologetic cynicism and sense of repartee steers the movie clear of any cheap tear-jerking. But mostly, he treats nostalgia through the prism of two beautiful love stories. One – my character’s – bubbling with excitement and passion. The other, in which the passion has totally died out. And the virtuosity with which he intertwines these two stories is a great reminder that we should never lose sight of our present. That it’s our individual responsibility to make sure that we don’t. That it is up to us to resist the diktats of modern life, and slow down the ever-accelerating pace. La Belle Époque isn’t just backward-looking with a “things-were-better-before” attitude. It’s solidly anchored in modern times. That’s what makes it so captivating and moving.

If, like Victor, you were offered the chance to relive a day or specific period in the past, what would you choose?

The period around my daughter’s birth. I was extremely present for my son’s birth and his first years. Much less so for his sister’s first year because I was very busy with Nous finirons ensemble (Little White Lies 2), so quite absent. Naturally, I regret it a little because I feel like I missed out on things. But there are a lot of other moments in my life that I’d like to relive, to live them better. That’s why Nicolas’ idea is so brilliant and touches us all.
Was it obvious that you and Nicolas would work together again after Mr. & Mrs. Adelman? What made you want to be a part of La Belle Époque?

Yes. At least for me it was obvious. In the same way that we create a circle of friends, we create a circle of partners-in-crime in our artistic lives. It’s no whim of fate. I think we both sensed we had things to share, as well as “artistic values.” I would have said yes to Nicolas without reading the screenplay. I like everything about his filmmaking. Besides, the story is fabulous! So is the dialogue! It’s like a delicious, copious dish with lots of sauce and lots of different flavors. (I don’t know why the culinary comparison came to me, but it just did!)

Could you describe your character and explain how it resonates for you?

Margot is an actress. That was very exciting because I have lots of different appearances, with different faces and different voices. But Margot doesn’t have the roles she dreams of. And she’s in love. But with a man she can’t manage to live with. She’s passionate, sometimes violent because pushed to her limits. I loved my character. It can be very hard to know what you have in common with your character. I’m always under the impression that’s I’m not like her at all and, as the shoot progresses, I find myself thinking, “Hey, that is a little bit like me...”

What changed most in Nicolas Bedos’ way of working between two films? And yours?

Nicolas seemed more serene. He wasn’t acting in this film so he was entirely focused on his directing. He knew what he wanted, he was very relaxed, and seemed to be enjoying the process more. He was reassured and therefore reassuring. It was more pleasant for me, too. We had learned to work with each other better and understood each other more quickly. I was more self-confident, at least a bit. I think we both very much enjoyed doing this film.

How would you describe the particular way Nicolas Bedos treats the theme of nostalgia in his film?

Nostalgia’s a theme that’s dear to him. To me, too. The way we consider our pasts, the way we have a fantasized view of everything that’s now out of reach. Our youth, a given period... It becomes sacred and wonderful. I thought the idea was fantastic because of the avenues it opens. Is an ersatz past enough to make the magic work? What do we miss the most in our memories?

If, like Victor, you were given the chance to relive a day or a specific period of your past, which would you choose and why?

I tend to regard as sacred everything that is no longer, everything that’s in the past. I’d have a hard time choosing!! Yikes! My answer changes every day, every hour even.
CAST

Victor
Antoine
Margot
Marianne

With the participation of

Maxime
Amélie
Adrien
Maurice / Yvon / Hemingway
Gisèle / Margot's friend
Freddy / Hans Axel Von Fersen

Daniel AUTEUIL
Guillaume CANET
Doria TILLIER
Fanny ARDANT
Pierre ARDITI
Denis PODALYDÈS
From the Comédie Française
Michaël COHEN
Jeanne ARÈNES
Bertrand PONCET
Bruno RAFFAELLI
From the Comédie Française
Lizzie BROCHERÉ
Thomas SCIMECA
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