OUR HEROES DIED TONIGHT
A FILM BY DAVID PERRAULT
DENIS MENICHE
JEAN-MARTINS

CONSTANCE DOLLE
PHILIPPE NAHON
PASCAL DEMOLO
ALICE BARNOL
YANN COLLETTE

MILLE ET UNE PRODUCTIONS
Paris, the early sixties. Wrestling is a prosperous business. Every match is a play in which wrestlers perform a role for the sole benefit of the bookies. Simon, known as “The Specter”, recruits Victor to play “the Bucher”, a villain everybody hates. Lonely and insecure Victor finds it hard to play the bad guy, fearing that he will actually become one. Simon offers him an exchange. Victor will enter the ring as “The Specter”, and receive all the cheers for once. The match starts and nobody notices the difference. But something goes wrong…

CAST & CREW

Denis MENOCHE: Victor
Jean-Pierre MARTINS: Simon
Constance DOLLE: Jeanne
Philippe NAHON: Ferdinand
Pascal DEMOLON: Le Finlandais
Alice BARNOLE: Anna
Yann COLLETTE: Tom

Producer: Farès LADJIMI (Mille et une productions)
Director: David PERRAULT
Script: David PERRAULT
Casting: Martin ROUGIER
Director of Photography: Christophe DUCHANGE
Artistic Director: Florian SANSON
Costumes: Virginie ALBA
Editor: Maxime POZZI-GARCIA
Sound: Thierry DUCLOS - Rémi GAUTHIER - Guillaume LERICHE

Length 100 MN - Black & White - 2.35 Scope
"Our Heroes Died Tonight" is not a documentary about the sixties. It’s a reverie about that reality… a reflection on the theme of heroes which reposes on a mythology that today has been forgotten: the golden age of French wrestling.

Much in the same manner of Jarmusch’s “Dead Man”, a film drawn from the history of the United States, mixed with a genre, the Western, that takes us on a poetic journey, like William Blake… my film is marked with reminiscences of film noir and other genres, more or less linked to that era. But it is absolutely not a pastiche, nor “an homage to” nor “in the style of”… Its starting point is imagery shared by everyone that takes us on a journey… It’s an intimate epic that takes us to the height of humanity, constructed around a masked figure…

"Our Heroes Died Tonight" is not a detective story per se. Nor is it a film entirely about wrestling. It uses codes and the atmosphere of this genre like an ideal set... as a pretext to evaluate themes like the confrontation between man and myth, reality and fiction, dream and truth. And though the story is inspired by some archetypes, and the characters could be allusions to famous figures, the references are not sterile. The aim is to create a certain vertigo, that allows us to question the very idea of mythology.

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Director’s Note

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I did not want to rely on the purely conceptual character of my film: mirror construction, play of masks, reflection of identity… On the contrary, I ventured into a form of permanent jubilation with truculent dialogues and significant secondary characters. I also wanted this world of illusions and doubles to find a veritable connection with the real, so that it would become organic. I believe I found this depth by relying on a virginal reality of all cinematic fiction – the golden age of wrestling – I allowed myself to be guided by the humanity of characters. “Our Heroes Died Tonight” is a film in which we can evolve along with our characters very much the same way we walk alongside our friends: in allowing moments of rambling and digression. The rhythm is punctuated by large block-sequences where the actors play a significant role, in an ambiance that I wanted to be very physical (like in the wrestling matches) and somnambulistic (like in the dream-sequences)… All this takes place within a pure, uncluttered scenography with few exteriors, and the most minimal amount of sets… In short, it’s a period film without any showy reconstructions which searches for its truth in a constant balance between realism and fantasy. And it asks the following question: In a world where the image of oneself has become more important than one’s true self, is it necessary to forge on with a mask in place? There’s no straightforward answer here: Simon will die when he’s stripped naked, while Victor will disappear in trying to become someone else…
Genesis of the film

The premise of this film began with a photo from the sixties: a wrestler stands before the counter of a bistro... His face is covered with a white mask, he sips a glass of red wine in the company of two men who look drunk. In this photo, there was something familiar, a typically Parisian iconography. Yet it was totally mysterious with the masked man. It gave rise to a sensation of déjà-vu mixed with an impression of something never-seen-before. In short, something in the order of French mythology visited by a super hero from a comic strip. This photo was all the more troubling in that it was a document of its time, especially since it looks like something out of a dark fantasy film...

After doing some research, I discovered, with almost childish amazement, a near-forgotten mythology, with villainous superheroes like André, the Giant, the Torturer of Bethune, the Little Prince, Kamikaze, Cheri Bibi... And most importantly, the star of stars, the man of his time that unleashed the most lively of emotions: the White Angel. The mysterious masked wrestler in the photo is none other than him. However, like all the wrestling stars of his day, he hit the height of popularity and was soon forgotten...

There was something troubling in this: how could the image of these wrestlers with such a distinctive look, disappear so easily? Indeed, the history of French wrestling had been nearly erased from our collective memory. Even the fans who had witnessed it first-hand seemed to remember it like a distant dream. These sports icons had at once been representative of a certain post-war France – still able to follow simple and universal figures, immaculate heroes and perfect bastards. These were pioneers of a more modern society, more swift to create ephemeral stars: the society of spectacle. This odd place at the crossroads of two epochs explained the reason for this amnesia... At least, that’s what I surmised. In the end, this image fascinated me because it seemed to synthesize themes that continued to obsess me: the beginnings of a society of spectacles, French mythologies, identity, forgetting...
Why are you interested in this era (the 60s) and a universe (wrestling from the same era) that you never knew first-hand?

The film was inspired by a black and white photo of the wrestler, “the White Angel”. He's drinking a glass of wine in a bar. With his mask on. I didn't know this world at all. As I did some research, I realized it was an extremely popular sport of the era, on television. And since that time, all those heroes have been completely forgotten. That's what interests me: things that disappear, get eradicated and no longer exist.

What struck you about that photo?

There was an incongruous aspect naturally, but also a mythological side as well. He seemed like a superhero from a Melville film. There was material to make a strong visual film.

You speak of superheroes, and this is an obvious reference in the film: the masks, the duality, the show, the fights… is this a genre that interests you?

I love the imagery, but don't like superhero films too much. Christopher Nolan’s “The Dark Knight” is interesting on paper, but it's a bit too much. Too much music, action. Paradoxically, I don’t think these films flesh out the figures enough. The only film of this genre that touched me was “Unbreakable”… a superhero film without a mask.

You speak of mythology: This is also as much about archetypes as it is about cinema…

The very idea of mythology is not often used in French cinema. This photo of “The White Angel”, for instance, is pure Franju. It reminds me of a scene from his film “Judex”, which totally haunts me. Judex, dressed in a tuxedo, comes to a party wearing a mask in the form of a bird’s head. He captivates the audience, also masked, by doing some magic tricks. Then, through some crafty sleight of hand, he ends up killing one of the guests, who collapses, struck by an invisible force. I couldn't tell you why, but it fascinates me. There's no explanation. It's a gratuitous scene, which doesn’t have a message, just the power of dreams. This is the thing I find missing in cinema today: this type of gratuitousness, which speaks to the hearts and minds of the viewers. I wanted to use this myth-laden imagery to make something French without making it stuffy and backward-looking. With this in mind, the film is truly hybrid, trans genre.

The period you’ve chosen has a dual quality, both in society as well as in cinema…

The 60s interests me because it’s a shift from a society capable of accepting spectacles that are naïve like the good wrestler against the bad wrestler, and going toward more modern things. The shift is to a society of consumption and spectacle. It's also a period on the cusp of cinema that was outmoded and corny, and the Nouvelle Vague. But I proceeded as if this "war" between the two cinemas never happened. I wanted to look at the fantasy realism of the Nouvelle Vague and even the films noirs of the American Series B films, and make my own parallel story of a parallel cinema. Naturally Godard did the same… taking archetypes of genre films to twist them into his own style. In this way, modern film is not a pastiche.

Charles Tesson, the director of the Critic’s Week spoke of your film like “something between Jacques Becker and Wong Kar-wai”.

That suits me, even if the mix of sports and the dreamier scenes...
It’s an undeniably film-lover’s movie. French cinema has a penchant towards naturalism, especially in first films. What would you say if we were to tell you, you were turning your back on realism? I feel as though being a film-lover is a problem for French filmmakers, that they’re afraid to assume it. It’s not a defect if we do something with it. It’s got to be put into perspective. My film plays with cinematographic codes to take the public to a different place, to my world. It’s got to be put into perspective. My film plays with its poetic function.

I wrote the film in a total state of melancholy. Everything I loved in cinema was dead, and the expression of it, with her cultural speech, like Gérard de Nerval. It’s a novel which was somewhat lost. It was in the middle of the first decade of 2000 – cinema was a little grey, mindlessly talky. That wonder was ignited in me once again with the wrestlers masks. Since then things have gotten decidedly better with films like “L’Apollonide, souvenirs de la maison close” and “Holy Motors”. These films dream a lot. I think there’s a great desire for a number of filmmakers of my generation to tear off the masks! They didn’t make films “about” something, but “with” something. Like in “Rio Bravo”, we travel with the characters, like they’re friends.

As for Wong, I wasn’t thinking about him at all. But there is an obsession. If a first French film is supposed to be personal, then yes “Our Heroes Died Tonight” is. It’s also a surrealist collage, shifting tones, popular series, and naturally, a taste for masks. That’s a modern character. But I wanted a more old-time physical appearance to make a contrast with this. Denis reminds me very much of Robert Mitchum. As for Jean-Pierre, there was the same psychological drama added in. In my mind, I was thinking of Tarantino and the way he makes “ultra references” to other movies, but still remains organic and melancholic. We feel he likes these characters. Twisting genres means playing with them, but resting by their side. What’s more, it’s got a very dense subject of society, news. It must come back to its poetic function.

You argue for a cinema that’s more poetic than political… I think there’s a great desire for a number of filmmakers of my generation to tear off the masks! They didn’t make films “about” something, but “with” something. Like in “Rio Bravo”, we travel with the characters, like they’re friends.
As a good cinema-lover, you must have chosen your camp: Are you more Howard Hawks or John Ford? Is it Hawksien or Fordien? In my heart, I'm Fordien, but the film turned out to be more Hawksian than expected once it was completed. The duo of Simon/Victor is undeniably Hawksien in his manner of deconstructing masculinity. I think of the matching shot when Alice throws Jean-Pierre on the bed, and the cut with him falling in the ring. But the film was initially Fordien, and is to a large degree because of these digressions. When it comes down to it, the intrigue is very simple and maintains the storyline. But it's the surrounding things that interest me. Nerval, songs, the chicken scenes, daily gestures…

Your title “Our Heroes Died Tonight,” is this a farewell to your heroes of the cinema?

The title is first and foremost inspired from the French title of one of my favorite films. “Nous avons gagné ce soir” (“The Set-up”) by Robert Wise. It's one of the best boxing films. It rings like a farewell, so does the scene with the melting statue of James Cagney, which is one of the reason I wanted to make this film. But at the same time, the end of the movie is sufficiently flamboyant so as to overcome any nostalgia.

Filmed in black and white, yes, but it's also digital…

Considering the quality offered by digital, I defy anyone to tell the difference between this and 35mm. When it came to calibrating the film, the question of the film's grain came up. But I wanted to underline the very pure quality of the film… very luminous, dreamy and modern. Everything the characters experience is pierced by light rather than going through psychologizing. When it comes down to it, it's best to rely on the image.

Light is important to the film as well as space. Not only in terms of composition, but also in terms of breathing. For instance, you let the scenes draw out…

One aspect of the film's intrepid side is naturally the main fight between Simon and Victor…

I wanted something theatrical, physical, of course. But also something that had interiority and a dreamy quality. During the editing, I got the idea, when Victor tears off Simon’s mask, to make a parallel sequence where we see him tearing off his own mask. The film is contained in this passage which is at once brutal and cottony. The fight was highly worked. It's not obvious on the screen, but we filmed in an abandoned chapel. We put up unrealistic, almost mystical lighting on the architecture. That's also part of the spectacle.

The Serge Gainsbourg music was vital in one of the key scenes, but you also use contemporary original compositions.

Julien Gester and Olivier Gorond wrote the music. I really like some of their synthpop music composed for their group Collateral. There was something electrifying in that song which aimed at a form of saturation that was perpetually delayed… the type of sensation that one can often feel in a dream or a nightmare. I didn't want a pastiche of an accordion/violin or the picturesque old-Paris-postcard look. Julien and Olivier's music was a mix of sounds that were similar to the human voice (a bit like Ennio Morricone) and other more electronic aspects. It adds to the dreamy dimension of the film. It accompanied the stylistic discrepancies punctuated throughout the story: dream sequences, slowed rhythm… I wanted it to sound like something in a church, giving it a quasi-mystical aspect to the whole. Electronic sounds, religious music… again the idea of the huge gulf between tradition and modernity.

Talking about Gainsbourg, Alice Barnole’s character says of the music: “This isn't France.” A bit earlier, Simon abruptly cuts off De Gaulle’s speech on the radio… “There’s always a playful distancing in your film regarding “national identity”. Just what is France for you?”

For me, it's something unexpected. During the entire film, I kept thinking of words: FRENCH PULP CINEMA. France is just pâle on the table or Maurice Pialat, even if I love Pialat. In Japan, French cinema is Godard and Chris Marker. I wanted to show France from a Pop point of view: The unexpected, hidden France… that of Nerval, Gainsbourg, Boris Vian, Cocteau and surrealism.

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