

#ZEROTOHERO

Jean
DUJARDIN

Mélanie
LAURENT

RETURN OF THE HERO

A film by **LAURENT TIRARD**

NOÉMIE MERLANT **CHRISTOPHE MONTENEZ** FROM THE COMÉDIE FRANÇAISE

EVERYNE QUILLÉ CHRISTIAN BULEARD WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF FÉODOR ATKINE & JD PROD LES FILMS SUR MESURE STUDIOCANAL FRANCE 3 CINÉMA NEXUS FACTORY UMDIA CV PROD CO-PRODUCTION WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF CANAL+ CINE+ FRANCE 5 TV5 MONDIALE ACCORDIUM WITZ LA BANQUE POSTALE IMAGE-SS-UFUND PHOTOGRAPHY BOUILLONNE CYNÉAUME SCHIFFMAN (AFD) EDITED BY YANN MALCOR (AFD) MUSIC BY MATHIEU LAMBOLEY PRODUCTION DESIGNER FRANÇOISE DUPERTUIS (AFD) COSTUMES DESIGNER PIERRE-JEAN LARROUQUE MAKE-UP ARTISTS MATHILDE JOSSET MÉLANIE QUEYREL CARRENO HAIR STYLISTS BÉNÉDICTE SUTTELECKAY PHILIPPE BOUIS GARCIA-SSONG ERIC DEVOUER ALEXANDRE FLEURBAST THOMAS GANDER FIRST ASSISTANT PRODUCTION MANAGER ALAN CORRIO SCRIPT DEVELOPER MARCALI FRATER CASTING BY JULIE DAVID UNIT MANAGER CHARLES ZIEGER HEAD OF PRODUCTION PATRICE ARRAT POST-PRODUCTION ABRAHAM GOLDBLAT NICOLAS BONNET SCREENPLAY BY LAURENT TIRARD AND CÉCILE VIGNERON PRODUCED BY MARC DUJARDIN AND OLYVIA LAGACHE DIRECTED BY LAURENT TIRARD

COMING SOON

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A FILM BY
Laurent TIRARD

Noémie MERLANT

Christophe MONTENEZ
DE LA COMÉDIE FRANCAISE

Screenplay

Laurent Tirard & Gregoire Vigneron

Production

JD PROD and LES FILMS SUR MESURE

Running time: 90 minutes

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SYNOPSIS

France 1809. The charming Captain Neuville is set to marry the naïve Pauline when the war breaks out, forcing Neuville to depart for the battlefield. After not hearing from the captain for months, Pauline soon starts to become ill with worry, pushing her sister Elizabeth to write fake letters on behalf of Neuville thinking he would never come back.

When Neuville finally returns home unexpectedly, he is welcomed in glory but in truth is a war deserter and an opportunistic coward. A suspicious Elizabeth is determined to expose the real Neuville and the two imposters are about to start a ruthless fight, conspiring against each other using the best tricks they can find.

Interview with

Laurent TIRARD

THE RETURN OF THE HERO is a period piece, an adventure comedy that takes on a genre in which French cinema was quite fruitful and successful in the past, but which has lost its momentum... Why did you feel like revisiting it?

Patrice Leconte recently told me that a journalist had asked him why nobody was making films like *Ridicule* (1996), which was released 20 years ago, any longer. I agree with this observation, and that's probably one of the reasons why I wanted to make this film: nobody makes them any longer and, as a moviegoer, I miss them. Clouzot (the filmmaker, not the inspector) used to say that the director was the first spectator of his/her film, and I think that my real motivation when I take on a new project is to make a film that I would like to see but can't find in the theaters. Costume films, and action comedies even more so, such as the films directed by Jean-Paul Rappeneau or Philippe De Broca, brought happiness to entire generations of moviegoers and were instrumental to my desire to make movies. I don't understand why they've disappeared from our screens, but I know it was really hard to find the money to get *THE RETURN OF THE HERO* made. When we met with the TV channels and the investors, they told us the audience wasn't interested in this kind of film. I'm quite skeptical about this, even if I realize that French cinema is mostly comedies about present-day concerns, with a very "realistic" and matter-of-fact approach, in which the visual aspect is usually not that important. It's as if, in the name of some alleged modernism, we can only address contemporary problems by showing daily life. As if we thought the audience couldn't – or didn't feel like – distancing themselves from reality. Does it actually reflect the spectators' taste or is it a financial decision (since period pieces are expensive to make)? I don't know, but in any event, I tend to champion some sort of formal classicism, some visual stylization, which doesn't prevent you from addressing contemporary issues.

But the idea of making *THE RETURN OF THE HERO* wasn't only motivated by this desire to revisit the genre?

No, of course... The creative process remains quite a mystery and you never know where the idea comes from or why it emerges at a particular moment... Even if I try as much as I can not to fall into self-analyzing (because I'm afraid of becoming so self-aware it would inhibit me), I can very well see that there are recurring themes I tend to favor: imagination, creation, lying, duplicity... I'm never really aware of it at the beginning of the project, but when I see the finished film, it's blindingly obvious! If you compare *THE RETURN OF THE HERO* to my first film *The Story of My Life* (2004) for example, the resemblance is striking. You could almost say that it was the same film only in a different disguise. Actually I think that the only thing I really choose consciously when I make a movie is its disguise. I believe I'm making a film about Molière but in fact I'm making a film about my own concerns as an author while hiding behind Molière's statue. I believe I'm adapting *Le Petit Nicolas* when in fact I'm talking about my own childhood while burying it in the world of Sempé and Goscinny. It's as if I had a huge closet filled with disguises and I would go through them each time thinking, "Which one haven't I used yet? And which one is better suited this time?" For *THE RETURN OF THE HERO*, there were two universes I particularly liked: Jane Austen's, with its style and refinement, and its characters trapped in rigid social codes, and the world of French adventure comedies, with its dynamism, its frantic running around and its strong taste for scoundrel characters. I thought mixing the two would make for quite a culture shock...

What's interesting in THE RETURN OF THE HERO - which was also the case with *Astérix & Obélix: God Save Britannia* (2012), *Little Nicholas* (2009) and *Molière* (2007) – is that you succeeded in making a period piece which resonates with very contemporary themes such as the quest for money, status-seekers, social climbing by lying...

First of all, I think it's important to differentiate between "period or historical films" and "costume films." For me, a period piece is a film that is trying to accurately render the life of a real person or how life was at a certain time. The idea of historical reenactment, accuracy and truth (if there is such a thing) is very important. A costume film on the other hand is a film that uses costumes as disguises, and a particular historical era in order to better talk about today. It might be a more subtle way to have people reflect on the world we currently inhabit. If you look at it this way, Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (2006) wasn't a period piece but a costume film in which an historical figure and Versailles were used to talk about the loneliness of the filmmaker's own golden youth in Beverly Hills. THE RETURN OF THE HERO is a costume film too, and it's rather disconcerting to see how much reinventing ourselves – which is the main theme of the film – plays a central part in our society. Social networks give us the opportunity to virtually magnify and proclaim ourselves heroes of our own lives. We are all impostors to a certain extent, or at least technology gives us the chance to become that, and many of us take advantage of it, without even realizing it sometimes... But the art of reinventing our lives wasn't created yesterday, and incidentally, Jane Austen, whose father was a minister and who had no romantic relationships we know of, had fake wedding certificates made with men who apparently were pure figments of her imagination, which was only discovered after she died!

The film is set at the end of Bonaparte's reign which is also the end of the revolutionary cycle, a time during which the bourgeoisie established its dominance through maneuvers and abuses, which relates to our troubled 21st century...

Yes, it's always rather exhilarating to use this era to make nods to the flaws of our world of today, like the "pyramid" con developed by Neuville in the film, which directly refers to Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme, or the negotiation scene between Elisabeth and Neuville, which echoes today's issue of women not getting paid as much as men, or even Elisabeth's celibacy by choice, and not out of bitterness, which also reflects a current situation.

The dialogue sounds really modern, but it doesn't sound incongruous to the way people talked in that era...

It's always a matter of instinct. When we wrote *Molière*, we immersed ourselves in the writing style of his plays while staying away from theatricality, which would have been a real turn-off. The difficulty was in finding the tone that would bring Molière's musicality to mind without sounding too awkward to the modern ear. It's the same with THE RETURN OF THE HERO: since it wasn't an historical reenactment, we needed to pinpoint the charm of the era while keeping today's audience in mind. We thought a lot about it while writing the dialogue, particularly when it came to Elisabeth, played by Mélanie. We wanted her to be modern, even then... We know the status of women in the 19th century, but Elisabeth gives herself a lot of liberties to break free from the constraints placed upon her. She's the kind of person who takes action, and it was important that her manner of speaking set her apart from her family and the people around her.

Why did you pick this particular era?

The 19th century is the epitome of romanticism, so it was an ideal setting for an adventure film that's also a romantic comedy. But if it had been a film in English, I would have made it into a western! Actually, watching it, I can see very clear references: at the beginning, when Elisabeth walks through the hall of the castle and Neuville arrives on his horse, it's a nod to *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956): the perfect example of the call for adventure, wide-open spaces... When Pauline recounts the feats of her hero to the people around her in the sitting room, there's a touch of *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939), and when Neuville gets out of the stagecoach, we're in a Sergio Leone film! Similarly, the Cossacks' attack at the end, it is entirely inspired by *My Name Is Nobody* (Tonino Valerii, 1973)...

Since you shot in some historical places, what work did the sets require?

First of all, I had the chance to work with a great production designer (Françoise Dupertuis) and a great costume designer (Pierre-Jean Larroque). We talked a lot before shooting; I told them how I envisioned things and they brought their perfect command of their crafts to the task. We've worked together since *Molière* and they both know my take on costume films: it needs to ring true, to have the flavor of the era, but I'm not attached to strict historical truth...

In THE RETURN OF THE HERO, were Mélanie Laurent's dresses or Jean Dujardin's flaming red uniform recreated, or invented?

All the costumes of the main cast have been created for the film. For Neuville's military costume you mentioned, I wanted something showy. In Jane Austen's novels, the officers always wear red uniforms, which is the color of the British army. It gives them an incredible presence. So I made Neuville a red hussar without troubling myself with historical accuracy. What mattered to me was the fact that when Jean arrives in his uniform, we understand right away who we are dealing with... Same thing with Mélanie's dresses: Pierre-Jean likes to work from saris and fabrics from India. The way he uses them gives the costumes the flavor of the era, maybe because there's something exotic in the patterns that gives the impression the fabrics coming from a remote place...

To go back to the sets, you had the opportunity to shoot in extraordinary castles, the upside being that you didn't have to build them, and the downside being that they are extremely protected and not always well suited for a film shoot...

Interestingly, we found out that there are a lot of private castles, which usually aren't in pristine shape, and that the arrival of a film crew often pleases the owners since, thanks to the work we do on the sets, the place tends to look better after we leave than before we got there! But there are also extremely well-preserved mansions in which there are indeed many restrictions, and a film shoot is heavy in terms of people and equipment, and at times, we almost had to use cloth pads under our feet in order to work! Personally, I tend to think restrictions foster creativity, and knowing you can only shoot from a certain angle, with specific lighting, can motivate you to find the best solutions and even make the scene better. The fact remains that these places give the film an incredible charm... I'm thinking about the Nandy castle, in the Seine-et-Marne department, that serves as the Beaugrand property in the film, for example. For the ball scene, we shot at Grosbois castle, in the Val-de-Marne department, which is superbly preserved... and in the beautiful village of Gerberoy, in the Oise department, which is a movie set in itself.

Let's talk about the actors now, but before addressing each one of them in detail, could you explain to us your initial idea for the couple formed by Elisabeth Beaugrand and Captain Neuville, played by Mélanie Laurent and Jean Dujardin...

It all started with Jean. We met on *Up for Love* (2016). We had a blast working together and wanted to do it again as soon as possible! I told him about an idea I'd been playing with for several years, thinking he would be perfect for the part: a Belmondo-like character bursting into a Jane Austen-like muted atmosphere. What a culture shock! Jean was thrilled, so the film was written with him in mind and his character was tailored for him from the get-go, especially since he was able to take part in its development. As for Elisabeth, it was more complicated, probably because, without being consciously aware of it, she is the one standing for me in the film. I identify with her: she's an introvert with a very rich inner world, who will be confronted with a creature of her own invention that takes a life of its own... In short, without wanting to quote Flaubert, one can say that Elisabeth, *c'est moi!* So choosing the right actress wasn't easy, and going for Mélanie wasn't either, since she'd never been in a comedy before.

So it was sort of a challenge?

Yes, and I love it! Going for the obvious is reassuring but there's nothing more thrilling than taking risks... So choosing Mélanie was indeed a risk, but in the end, it turned out to be a great idea! And beyond the audience's pleasure at seeing her on-screen with Jean for the first time (an important aspect in a romantic comedy), they'll also discover Mélanie in a way they've never seen her.

With a natural talent for comedy, especially the rhythm it requires...

Absolutely, and it surprised us both. When we first met, I discovered a very funny person in real life, who had almost exclusively played dramatic or romantic parts! She confessed right away that she was terrified but also very excited to go for a comic part. Like all actors, she wants to be challenged, and we decided to trust each other. I remember that at the end of the first week of shooting, Mélanie came to me telling me that comedy was exhausting to play! She didn't realize how incredibly physical it is and how much energy is required to keep up the pace. But since she's a hard worker, she loved it!

Jean Dujardin is a seasoned comedy actor but it's remarkable how you both managed not to overplay his part, for a character that could easily have been over the top...

Jean is incredibly good at action and stunts, a sort of Jean-Paul Belmondo for the 21st century, and he's also charming and self-deprecating, and therefore endearing in any circumstance, even when the characters he plays are crooks, impostors or idiots as in the *OSS 117* movies (Michel Hazanavicius, 2006 & 2009). But for *THE RETURN OF THE HERO*, we didn't want to be parodic. Neuville needed to have the audience laugh for most of the film, but at the end he also needed them to realize that "right, he wasn't just funny..." That's a recurring feature in all my films: characters must be endearing. We have to be able to sympathize with them, and no matter what they do, they have to be redeemable at the end. That's the case for Captain Neuville: he's an unscrupulous crook whom we get a kick out of (because we all secretly dream we could be as transgressive as he is), but at the end, we like him. That's really important: a comedy isn't complete if you only laugh. To be fully successful, it needs to be emotionally potent...

When did you realize that the couple you created on the page worked so well on-screen?

I really had to wait to have them on the set. We only had a few "flat" script readings without the actors really getting into character. There, on the set, I quickly saw, on the second day, that it worked wonderfully between her and Jean! We were shooting the scene in which Neuville comes back after having been away for a long time, when he appears as a bum and Elisabeth recognizes him and tells him what she has been up to while he was gone... We spent the entire day shooting this pivotal moment in the film and the chemistry was obvious...

The performances of Noémie Merlant and Christophe Montenez – in the parts of Pauline de Beaugrand and Nicolas, her husband "by default" – deserve to be explored. The two young actors play supporting parts that are nonetheless instrumental to the plot...

Absolutely, and to play these parts opposite the two stars of the film, I wanted fresh faces, which is exactly what I got with Christophe, who comes from the Comédie Française theatre but had never been in a film before! Noémie is better known on the big screen as she's appeared in *Smart Ass* (Kim Chapiron, 2014), *One Wild Moment* (Jean-François Richet, 2015) and *Heaven Will Wait* (Marie-Castille Mention-Schaar, 2016) for which she was a César nominee for Best Female Newcomer. I love this idea of helping new talents get discovered, like Alice Taglioni, who became known through her part in *The Story of My Life*.

It's a rule you apply for all of your films: well-known actors such as Evelyne Buyle, Féodor Atkine or Laurent Bateau, mixed with wonderful fresh faces!

Yes, it brings back an old tradition of supporting parts that has unfortunately kind of disappeared in French cinema. TV channels and investors that finance films and need to be reassured are partly responsible for it, they ask for better-known actors, even in the smaller parts... But I believe spectators enjoy seeing actors that might look familiar but whose names they don't necessarily know and who, for the two minutes they are on-screen, perfectly portray their characters... Anglos call them the *supporting cast*, and that's really what they are: actors who support the film...

Let's also talk about the score in THE RETURN OF THE HERO, which is quite startling. It's sweeping and lyrical without drowning out the story or underlining too much...

The obvious or easy thing to do would have been to compose a classical score matching the era in which the film is set but, as I told you, while writing the script, images of westerns were coming to me! I was listening to Ennio Morricone's music and that's the direction I gave Mathieu Lamboley, who composed the score for the film. We started early on the music, before the shoot. Mathieu would have me over to play me things he wrote and one day I said "That's it! That's our theme!" It's rather uncommon to find the theme before even starting to shoot, and it gave me the chance to already have a tune in my head while shooting... Mathieu was with me during the entire making of the film, from the set to the editing room, and he delivered a score that's a mix of baroque and western. It's a surprising mix but I think it reinforces the originality and the modernity of the whole thing. There is a real pleasure (like in Tarantino films, for example) in mixing several film genres to create something new.

Since you mentioned pleasure, did you feel any during the shoot, which was rather complicated, or can you only enjoy it now, when you can distance yourself from the film?

You have to be quite mad to embark on the adventure of making a film. If we knew all the difficulties we'd have to overcome, all the problems we'd have to deal with, we would never do it. Making a film requires first and foremost a lot of work. Luckily you're driven by a dream that prevails even during the most difficult times. And from this dream comes pleasure, despite exhaustion, doubts and problems of all kind that can sometimes unrelentingly hammer you down. There's this little voice inside you that tells you that you are going for something that might inspire thousands of people to dream, that will make them happy or even change their lives and that you are very lucky to be doing this incredible job. I find pleasure in the process. Writing can be very lonesome, with moments of intense doubt during which, as my cowriter Grégoire Vigneron says, one can descend into "the valley of despair," but it's also at this stage that the dream is the strongest. Shooting is when things become tangible, when the dream comes face to face with physical, human and material reality, but that's also the stage I like most because it feeds on a collective energy. And there's the time constraint, which forces you to be in the moment. For an overly anxious person like myself, it's pure pleasure, the rest of the world doesn't exist any longer, daily material problems don't have a hold over you, only the scene, the actors and the camera matter. As for the editing process, which is the third stage of writing the film, it is usually more peaceful. There are still doubts, of course, but they're not as strong as during the development of the script, and there's also the thrill of finding solutions to save certain scenes or magnify certain moments. Then, when the film is done, it's only fear: fear of finding out how it will be received, which we have no control over.

THE RETURN OF THE HERO is your fourth film in eight years. Some have been very successful, others less so... How do you look back on this intense period of your life?

With the eyes of someone who is in serious need of a break! It's true that projects have been following one another, since the very beginning, since I directed seven films in the last fifteen years, and in the middle of it all, there was the *Astérix* adventure, which took three years to be made... There's a kind of frenzy going on here which can be explained by the fact that I wanted to make films since I was 13, and I was 36 when I shot my first, and didn't want to stop again. I have about one new idea for a film per month, which I write down in my notebooks. Most of them probably won't be made, but some are already being written... Two years ago, I met the English novelist Jonathan Coe. While talking to him, he asked me: "Do you have the same problem I have: the fear of not getting any new ideas?" I told him I had the opposite problem and that my personal fear had to do with not living long enough to be able to shoot all the films I had in my mind! But making films requires a lot of time and energy, two elements that are not open-endedly expandable. So I need to discipline myself and learn to go slow and steady if I want to win the race... 2018 will be a year dedicated to resting and thinking. I'm going to enjoy life, my family, my children and my friends, and I'm going to sort through my eighteen projects for films, series, animation (and even, more recently, a documentary) and figure out what's best suited for this moment. Cinema is going through a revolution, with the arrival of Netflix, Amazon, Apple and others that are going to change everything and speed up the transformation process that's already started in the way people are consuming films. It would be suicide to deny this phenomenon, and fighting it seems ludicrous. We need to adapt and figure out how we can keep on making quality things within the new reality of the market. It's quite scary and quite exciting at the same time, like any revolution.

Interview with

Jean DUJARDIN

What motivated you to do this film? Was it the subject matter, or the opportunity to work with Laurent Tirard again?

Both. We'd just finished shooting *Up for Love* with Laurent and it'd been a good experience... He set up a meeting at a restaurant to talk to me about another project and in ten minutes he had explained the whole story of THE RETURN OF THE HERO. I was very excited and agreed to do it right away! He went off to write the script with Grégoire Vigneron, and I was curious to find out what it would be like. I really like the way they construct their stories. Their first draft felt quite thorough to me... With Laurent, we don't have to talk a lot, we figure each other out, and I know that we both have, not exactly nostalgia, but happy childhood memories of the films by Jean-Paul Rappeneau, the films with Jean-Paul Belmondo or Vittorio Gassman. We were nourished by these sprightly comedies, and I think this film gave us the chance to revisit and update the genre...

Why do you think this genre has vanished from the big screen, when it used to be a strong trend in French cinema?

Simply because trends evolve by definition and other trends have replaced it... French comedies began to rely on the entire family as moviegoers, then it changed again with the development of TV and now social networks and medias. I think that today's audiences need to feel especially involved in the stories we are telling them. In the mix of all this, we forgot about costume dramas or even about the idea that you can use a different era to actually talk about what we are going through nowadays! It's exactly what we did with *OSS 117*... But you have to be careful not to get ossified in a period piece. If you don't include modern female characters, or play with men's failings and all that people are currently talking about, there's no point! We would only use the era as an excuse to make a period piece with beautiful dresses, nice uniforms, gorgeous horses and castles, which is the minimum we can do. People don't care about this, it only pleases film buffs! As a spectator, with a film like THE RETURN OF THE HERO, I feel like saying: "OK fine, but who is this character? What's at stake for him? Well, go ahead, entertain me!" Laurent's comedies are not complacent: they move fast and echo our times in terms of gender relations, which can be endlessly addressed... I know why the show *Un gars, une fille* (Guy A. Lepage, 1999-2003) was so striking and successful: there are so many possible combinations. Like *The War of the Roses* (Danny DeVito, 1989)... And when on top of that, you can have fun as an actor with a co-star like Mélanie, it makes for a wonderful hour and a half!

The film addresses other modern themes such as our concern for how we look, our relationship with money...

Yes, our obsession with the image of ourselves, with showing off, with having money! The film is full of nods to the 21st century, like the Madoff scheme, social climbers, flatterers, all these things that will never go out of fashion, I believe!

What motivated you when creating your Captain Neuville, who embodies a lot of these aspects?

First of all, I wanted to have fun with myself, that's often where I start! Then I reread some material, like poems by Victor Hugo, which we actually used in the film, when Neuville recounts what a mass slaughter the battle against the Austrians was. I got the idea from an old film with Henry Fonda, *Drums Along the Mohawk* (John Ford, 1939), in which he comes back from the War of Independence against the English and recounts the terrible bloodbath it was while simply standing against a wall... What a great idea! And it suited us fine to do the same and not spend our entire budget on a cavalry charge. But beyond the financial aspect, I like the idea of making do with constraints...

Especially since the scene you're talking about, at the end of the film, is really important for the way in which we come to perceive Neuville...

Absolutely, and actually, in substance, this scene doesn't really belong in a comedy. It gives Neuville credibility – he no longer comes across only as a joke of a captain! This guy might have started as an armchair soldier who didn't have to see war up-close, but then he came face to face with it... He came to know fear, and I would, we all would, be scared... Going over the parapet, stepping over the trench and charging straight ahead... For who? For what? For France, the Emperor? What's all this mumbo jumbo? I really like this mixture of genres: the film is not just a comedy. We needed to surprise ourselves and we did. We navigate between the world of Georges Feydeau and something very modern; I liked this blending of registers, in the midst of a costume film...

Speaking of costumes, yours is rather lavish: the beard, the mustache, the blood-red uniform... Is it all part of the fun?

Of course: the full gear! Very few projects like this one cross my path, so I naturally went full throttle... Neuville's mustache looks like Harvey Keitel's mustache in *The Duellists* (Ridley Scott, 1977): it's a manly mustache, very different from the thin one I had in *The Artist*! We're close to the paintings of Jean Murat, although he himself was quite feminine in the way he dressed. We're deep into the myth of the hero, we were going for the legend, trying out things without really knowing if they'd work in the end. The bushy beard for example, I grew it for months before trimming it nicely: that's cinema, you can't predict everything... I know that in principle I look rather good wearing costumes and I like the idea of transforming into a captain of the Napoleonic army, a secret agent, a blond surfer: I have fun believing it, so I just go for it... There's a direct and reassuring connection with childhood in all of this and I would love for *THE RETURN OF THE HERO* to renew the popularity of this type of cinema.

You also shot in castles, places that are filled with history. Do such atmospheres influence and stimulate the cast and crew?

They do because they help you believe in the whole thing: you're not in the studio, you're walking on real wooden floors, lit by real candles, and it makes everything believable, even the extras. I looked at them a lot during shooting and they never felt anachronistic... These elements of truth have always helped me: I rely on them, I like to play with props, I need to touch things. I'm in a movie, therefore I'm not myself, or I go back to being the 12-year-old kid who used to go to the movies on Sunday afternoons... I think we all shared this feeling, with Laurent Tirard, the DP Guillaume Schiffman, the costume designer Pierre-Jean Larroque, and again, on a limited budget and with eight weeks of intense shooting...

In this film, you ride horses, you dance – did you also enjoy the physical requirements that came with the part?

Yes! I'd ridden horses for *Lucky Luke* (James Huth, 2009) but as I'm getting older, I'm feeling a bit nostalgic about the start of my career. Fifteen years ago, I learned to ride horses, I learned to wrestle for *OSS 117*, then at one point I realized I wasn't being asked to learn new things anymore... I'm the industrious type: I like for things to be neatly wrapped up. For this film, I practiced some minuet dancing, some horse riding, some weapons handling: it's all part of the pleasure of and motivation for being an actor, and I admit it, I was missing it a little...

What you describe resonates with what Jean-Paul Belmondo said about his job as an actor. The resemblance between the two of you is quite striking at certain moments in the film. You're comfortable with this kinship but does it weight on you at times?

Not at all. We recently had lunch with friends, and Jean-Paul, at home, and at some point he talked with great admiration about the actor Jules Berry... I re-watched some old films and realized that there was definitely some Jules Berry in Jean-Paul Belmondo... Admiring doesn't imply imitating. I admire Jean-Paul but I've never tried to imitate him. The only thing I took from him (and he did the same with Jules Berry!) is the pleasure of acting, this devilish and childish pleasure that transpires on-screen. That's the connection between the two of us... We all have predecessors in this trade: Vincent Cassel mentions Patrick Dewaere. When I was a kid, I saw this man having fun on-screen when adults were supposed to be responsible: Jean-Paul was sometimes totally irresponsible in his movies! It helps me get better, I take what amuses me, what makes me feel good, while also realizing how lucky I am to be doing this job and being able to make people happy. I don't want to miss anything that Jean-Paul could give me. My father is my role model for certain things, my brothers are the same for other things, and Jean-Paul is for this... When I went on Martin Scorsese's set (for *The Wolf of Wall Street*, 2013), I had to think about Jean-Paul in order to relax! Can you imagine what he's lived through shooting *Cartouche* (Philippe de Broca, 1962), *The Married Couple of the Year Two* (Jean-Paul Rappeneau, 1971) for six months, with humongous budgets: what magnificent playgrounds those must have been. What a wonderful time it was! But I'm not complaining, it lives on, and I'm happy that *THE RETURN OF THE HERO* found fundings and could be made as a widely-appealing, sophisticated and proud comedy...

For spectators, pleasure also comes from discovering a new on-screen couple, like the one you and Mélanie Laurent, playing Elisabeth Beaugrand, form... It was a real challenge since it's Mélanie's first role in a comedy. How did she throw herself into this project?

Mélanie arrived with the desire to shed a lot of things and the excitement of a little girl wanting to have fun and dress up! I had the same experience with Jocelyn Quivrin on the shoot of *99 francs* (Jan Kounen, 2007): he had just been in a film directed by Eric Rohmer and he was convinced he couldn't do it... Starting with the first reading, Mélanie was very quick, very efficient, she immediately found the right technique: playing her part without trying to be funny or overdoing it. It came naturally, just being in the scenes. We discussed our parts, I gave her a few pointers, but not that many since she was pretty well equipped already, with this natural instinct for constantly looking me in the eye. That's how comedy works: keep looking in my eyes, I'll keep looking in yours, and I will respond to what you're giving me... Mélanie was a wonderful partner, we were instantaneously close. We'd stay on the set during the switches between shots, to continue playing with each another! Beyond being enjoyable, it also helped to create a dynamic between Elisabeth and Neuville, like a game of ping-pong. And we were never afraid to slightly divert from our lines, knowing we would find our way back into the text. The film's dialogue was quite literary and not so easy to memorize, so we simplified it! In *THE RETURN OF THE HERO*, Mélanie perfectly managed to use her own personality, the one that people don't necessarily know: her sense of humor, her goofiness... She would often tell me: "I need to step out of my comfort zone", and I would reply: "Attack me, you have to bite me. I'm only reacting to you"... She fully went for it, she's an amazing actress, she gets it so quickly, she's a real sponge around people. It's been a long time since she appeared in *Dikkenek* (Olivier Van Hoofstadt, 2006) but I'm convinced she'll be back doing another comedy very soon!

The two main parts are great, but you are also surrounded by wonderful supporting actors, down to the smallest roles!

I love it! Noémie Merlant and Christophe Montenez are absolutely insane in this film. Jean-Michel Lahmi too, he's a fixture in Laurent Tirard's films, and Laurent Bateau, whom I worked with on *OSS 117*... I'm always a great fan of my co-actors, I see them like an alignment of planets. It can be tricky because I get carried away and often have to bite my lip not to crack up. That said, if I'm not laughing on a movie set, I don't belong there! All these actors brought something to the film, they sustained it, like a theatre company does. Actually, *THE RETURN OF THE HERO* is a film that could be made into a play, which isn't common, it usually works the other way around... I really enjoy arriving on a set and discovering the other actors' personalities, like witnessing Noémie Merlant's or Christophe Montenez's instinctive energy as they explore the innocence of their characters, then their rage. You have to be daring, to get scared when you're making a movie: I got scared with the dialogue that was taxing at times, there were days I was slower, I felt less acute than others... Some shots had to be done multiple times because of logistical constraints and it was challenging to be technically precise while still having fun. And after seven hours of shooting, it's not always easy to stay fresh, believe me!

How would you talk about Laurent Tirard as a director?

He has a great thing going for him: he doesn't equivocate! He's not one to wonder for hours where he's going to set his camera: he knows... He's very meticulous, creative and sensitive as well. We've always been able to figure each other out, to work and share, to make mistakes and get it right together. And Laurent is the kind of director who gives you enough space: I could come up with any proposal. He trusts you and has a sharp eye, so if he likes it, he goes for it! Michel Hazanavicius is the same. Both are directors who will give you directions, that are often right, but they will also give you latitude.

The obvious pleasure you take playing Captain Neuville will probably annoy a few people who think that your choices as an actor aren't consistent with winning an Academy Award!

Only time will put things back in order. It should have worked differently for me, to stick to what was expected of me: for me to embody the Oscar-winning actor, to become the face of a fragrance... Well, I didn't: there are no obligations! I'm honest in the choices I make, which is why I have no problem with people criticizing my films, but I have a problem with people criticizing my choices! When I decided to do *The Brice Man* (James Huth, 2005), it was risky for me! I went into it with all my faith, my enthusiasm, my silliness... I'll say it again: cinema is not to be taken lightly but it ain't that important. You know, I'm a fatalist, and I'm mortal. I know death is there, somewhere. I'm 45 year old. How long do I still have to live? I don't know, nobody knows; after me, there will be others... I knew it was going to be my lot and that I would have to put up with it for two or three years and then it would go away. It's been taking a little longer because just stating your position isn't enough: people think it's a posture. If there really is one actor who doesn't calculate things, it's me! I never ask myself what people want to see me in, while that's exactly what I was asked to do! You know, I'd be happy to work with the Dardenne Brothers, but the truth is, they're not calling me up! Nobody's waiting for you, not in France nor in the US. Nobody ever waited for me, even at the *café-théâtre*, so I continue to look for sweet or bitter smells, wandering in places I'm not familiar with. And once in a while, I go for some fun, with *The Brice Man*, *Up for Love* or *THE RETURN OF THE HERO*. I also just finished a film with Gustave Kervern and Benoît Delépine, because I wanted a taste of their anarchist, poetic universe.

Interview with

Mélanie LAURENT

There's something one realizes right away when watching you in *THE RETURN OF THE HERO*: your natural talent for comedy. Yet this is almost your comedy debut, 20 years after *Dikkenek*...

Especially since, in *Dikkenek*, my part wasn't exactly funny: the situations and characters around me were comical, but I was being rather earnest in my acting! In fact, I came to realize that *THE RETURN OF THE HERO* is really my first comedy and that all these years being an actress I was probably afraid of rubbing shoulders with the genre. But it wasn't calculated on my part: I was just waiting for a part like Elisabeth Beaugrand to come along...

What was your first impression when you read Laurent Tirard & Grégoire Vigneron's script?

I felt I'd landed in *The Married Couple of the Year Two*, one of these adventure comedies in which characters can't stand each other because they like each other too much, without knowing how to declare their love. There were these bouncing dialogues between the two of them from the get-go, going like "I'm after you, I got you, I hurt you, I love you"! A game of love as in Georges Feydeau's plays, that's crazy and fun to play. What also struck me was Elisabeth's delivery: I tend to speak really fast and I was confronted with a character who conveyed exactly the same energy! I instantly fell in love with this young woman who's totally crazy and strong at the same time, thinking I might finally manage to act in a comedy while also having fun... It's quite an insane part to champion.

What's interesting about Elisabeth, beyond her comical side, is that she advocates a social position for women in the male chauvinist society of the early 19th century. She's a feminist before the notion probably even existed!

Absolutely, and she clearly states her opinions in the film, she speaks out. I'm always attracted to playing women with strong personalities and convictions... I don't think I ever played a part in which I'm a victim, a subject: I've picked female characters who fight back. That's one of my fears when I start preparing for a film: to start from scratch, to assemble a character. I always look for elements that are going to help me be natural in my interpretation. In comedies I've been offered previously, the story felt too nutty for me to be able to find the right rhythm, to deliver the right line, the one that depends entirely on the actor. Here, Elisabeth is indeed a feminist before her time, she can defend herself, she's also an artist in her own way, and she's funny without trying to be...

Let's talk about the physical component of your part: there are scenes in which you had to take a plunge (both literally and figuratively), to follow the crazy pace of comedy you mentioned earlier... Isn't it exhausting?

Yes, and that's an understatement! I'm thinking about the first day of the shoot, when Elisabeth recognizes Neuville, who arrives on a stagecoach, dressed in rags, with his rough beard... We had loads of lines to deliver! So, there I was, doing the scene over and over again, when I realized how physically demanding it was: I had to run, fall, catch Jean, be almost hysterical... I knew the script by heart, I had prepared very seriously for a month, but having to do and redo it on the spot, in rhythm, while delivering all these lines: it wore me out. When Laurent said "Cut" at 5 PM, I went straight to bed... It's the first time that's ever happened to me, I never get tired... At the end of this first day, I went to my room, I lay down on my bed and I didn't get up again until the next day! I remember telling Jean: "That's what comedy is like?"... I mean, you can't even have a glass of wine at dinner! And Jean answered: "Yep, welcome to our world..."

Did Elisabeth's full outfit, her dresses, her hairstyle, contribute to the pleasure you took in portraying her?

It did, but from the get-go, with Pierre-Jean Larroque, the costume designer, we didn't want to turn it into fashion show for Elisabeth. Actually, in the film, she wears the same dress on few occasions... As for her hairdos, I asked for them to remain simple. The idea was to find the right balance: it's a period piece set within the high bourgeoisie but this woman doesn't follow the social codes of her class. And I have to add that at the beginning of the 19th century, women barely used any make-up, as opposed to the end of the monarchy during which faces were overly powdered, often as a kind of camouflage! At the beginning of the 19th century, people started to recognize the value of washing yourself, of taking baths. Almost like a desire for purity... It was quite enjoyable not to have to spend hours in the make-up room, especially since, as was said before, the days of work were rather long and exhausting! Oh yes, one thing was quite trying: corsets. They don't make it easy to breath, especially if you have pages and pages of dialogue to speak...

Let's talk about your co-star in THE RETURN OF THE HERO: Jean Dujardin...

I admired Jean as an actor, I'd crossed paths with him but I didn't know him personally. Starting with the first reading, he was kind and attentive! I realized he was there for me, he was reassuring and focused. It became even more obvious when we started shooting: I realized it was one of the happiest encounters of my career... Jean was a wonderful partner, he never let me down, he was always there for me whenever I had doubts. Actually he's the one who taught me comedy, he taught me to outdo myself and he invited me to let go and have fun with him... He never stopped giving me advice, without ever making me feel pressured, and all while having fun like little kids! I'd heard that shooting a comedy could be tedious, because it's demanding and precise, which is true, but we had wonderful laughs on the set and I feel like I went through this shoot with the best companion in the world. I love this guy!

The other important companion in this adventure was the director Laurent Tirard...

I'm realizing that an acting career is built around the people you meet and the votes of confidence they give you. The last time a director believed in me the way Laurent did was with Philippe Lioret (for *Don't Worry, I'm Fine*, 2006). They both gave me the means to venture where I'd never been, to explore new areas... It was a complicated film to make, Laurent focused heavily on the *mise en scène*, with the desire to take us where he dreamed we'd go... He's a smart and instinctive director: when he saw the connection between Jean and me, he understood he had to let us have fun and he needed to listen to some of our suggestions. The confidence he gave us made for a really pleasant and happy shoot...

At the end of this adventure, your first comedy, do you feel like doing it again soon?

Well, it's a very addictive exercise. After the first exhausting day of shooting, while lying on my bed and gazing at the ceiling, I was already thinking: "It feels so good!" Art house cinema has made me happy for many years, I really enjoyed shooting films full of harshness and emotions where you have to go and dig deep into yourself to give something real to the camera... At the end, it weights a bit on you to carry all those pains. Sometimes I would get sick after making a film... Here, I came out thinking, "When are we doing it again?"

CAST

Elisabeth	Mélanie Laurent
Neuville	Jean Dujardin
Pauline	Noémie Merlant
Madame Beaugrand	Evelyne Buyle
Monsieur Beaugrand	Christian Bujeau
Eugénie	Fabienne Galula
Nicolas Bonvallet	Christophe Montenez
Général Mortier-Duplessi	Féodor Atkine
Monsieur Dunoyer	Laurent Bateau
Monsieur Loiseau	Jean-Michel Lahmi

CREW

Réalisateur	Laurent Tirard
Scénario	Laurent Tirard Grégoire Vigneron
Producteurs	JD PROD LES FILMS SUR MESURE
Directeur de production	Patrice Arrat
Directrice de casting rôles	Julie David
Directeur de la photographie	Guillaume Schiffman
Chef opérateur du son	Eric Devulder
Créateur de costumes	Pierre-Jean Larroque
Chef décoratrice	Françoise Dupertuis