

Film

JAKE WILSON



A prisoner of fortune

A rich man sets out for revenge in *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Might this be why the 1846 classic still rings true?

He's been a martial arts expert, a school prefect and a shiftless teleporter marooned in space. The Count of Monte Cristo even made his presence felt in an episode of *The Simpsons*.

But a new screen adaptation of Alexandre Dumas' 1846 tale of a man who seeks his revenge after being falsely imprisoned brings it all back home.

The three-hour extravaganza, written and directed by French filmmakers Alexandre De La Patelliere and Matthieu Delaporte, was among last year's biggest hits at the French box office and was nominated for 14 Césars – the French Oscars.

"It's a coming of age story, in the beginning," says De La Patelliere. "But it's also a prison story, a revenge story, a romantic story."

There is also what Delaporte describes as an element of soap opera.

The Count of Monte Cristo is among the best-known novels by Dumas, author of *The Three Musketeers* and other works of swashbuckling historical fiction that made him hugely popular in the 19th century. It was quickly translated into many languages and became a phenomenon across Europe and beyond. The story has inspired countless imitations by other writers, as well as screen adaptations.

Hollywood has tackled it many times, most famously in 2002, with Jim Caviezel in the lead and Guy Pearce as the sneering chief villain. In 1986, the late Brandon Lee starred in a Hong Kong martial arts version, *Legacy of Rage*. The US science fiction writer Alfred Bester relocated the plot to outer space in his 1956 novel *The Stars My Destination*, and Stephen Fry gave it a modern British twist in his 2000 novel *The Stars' Tennis Balls*. The *Simpsons* parody was called *The Count of Monte Fatso*.

De La Patelliere and Delaporte have worked together for the past two decades on a range of projects from TV animation to theatre, and co-wrote and co-produced a successful movie version of *The Three Musketeers* (directed by Martin Bourboulon) that came out in two parts in 2023.



From top: Pierre Niney in *The Count of Monte Cristo*; directors Alexandre De La Patelliere and Matthieu Delaporte. PHOTOS: PALACE FILMS, GETTY IMAGES

If talking to them is any indication, they function very smoothly as a team; they field questions alternately, taking turns to speak on behalf of the "third person" Delaporte says emerges when they work together.

As admirers of *The Count of Monte Cristo* since their teens, they set out to be faithful to its spirit, and to the basics of the plot at least. The hero, Edmond Dantes (played by Pierre Niney), is a poor but noble sailor arrested on the eve of his wedding and accused of being a traitor. For the next eight years he's imprisoned in an island fortress, where his wise old cellmate (Pierfrancesco Favino) reveals the location of a hidden treasure.

After making his escape, Dantes returns to the French mainland disguised as the mysterious, wealthy Count of Monte Cristo, befriending the three men who conspired to bring about this downfall.

The suspense is in waiting to see how his scheme will play out, with twists that aren't the same in every retelling. In this new version, Delaporte says, certain changes were inevitable; since the book runs for about 1500 pages, subplots have been dropped and characters combined.

Famously, Dumas worked a lot like a modern TV showrunner, publishing his novels in serialised instalments. Did De La Patelliere and Delaporte consider turning this project into a streaming series? The answer from both is a firm no.

"It was very important to us to make a feature film for theatrical release," Delaporte says. The film has a three-act structure akin to a 19th-century opera, with a similar running time.

What is it, in their eyes, that has made this story so durable?

"It can be considered one of the first novels about the industrial era," Delaporte says. "The protagonist is a unique individualist, and in that respect there's quite a few resonances with our present time."

Dantes, he says, is "an anti-hero [who] is saved by his romanticism". But some dark undertones remain: after all, this is the story of "one of the richest men in the world, who decides to waste his fortune in order to seek revenge".

De La Patelliere compares the book to the Bible, and not only on account of its length. Edmond's revenge quest, he says, is in the spirit of the Old Testament's "an eye for an eye".

But gradually the tone changes. "It shifts on to the issues dealt with in the New Testament, like the question of grace, of being able to pardon and to forgive, the prevailing of the spirit over the law."

Beyond all that, what draws the pair to Dumas is what they call his "romanesque" quality, a word that has no straightforward English equivalent. De La Patelliere suggests that "bigger than life" is close to what they're getting at: the elements in the story that seem most improbable are exactly those that make it a good yarn.

As adolescents, De La Patelliere says, "the story about the escape from the prison island... made us dream. And we wanted the audience to dream."

The Count of Monte Cristo is in cinemas from April 10, with advance screenings this weekend. Jake Wilson travelled to France courtesy of the Alliance Française.