



The Counts of Monte Cristo

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by James Mottram

Movie trends can be very cyclical. But probably few people anticipated the return of the French swashbuckler. Or indeed the revival of interest in Alexandre Dumas, the 19th Century novelist behind such classics as *The Three Musketeers* and *Man in the Iron Mask*. But ever since Martin Bourboulon's hugely successful two-part take on *Musketeers*, starring Eva Green, Vincent Cassel and Romain Duris, that's all changed.

Now comes *The Count of Monte Cristo*, a new adaptation of Dumas' compelling work that was first serialised between 1844 and 1846. The directors are Matthieu Delaporte and Alexandre de La Patellière, who previously co-wrote the scripts for Bourboulon's *Musketeers* two-parter. A hugely entertaining romp, with production values capable of rivalling any Hollywood movie (the budget is €43 million), it stars Pierre Niney as Edmond

Dantès, an imprisoned sailor who learns of a vast treasure on the remote island of Monte Cristo.

“We’ve been dreaming of working on the Dumas universe for a long, long time,” says de La Patellière, when FilmInk meets with he and Delaporte in Paris at UniFrance event, aimed at promoting French cinema. “Up to five years ago, it seemed really impossible, because this kind of production in France demands a big budget, which is not so usual for our cinema industry. But a producer offered us the opportunity to make *The Three Musketeers*. And in that period of craziness, they asked us what we wanted to do next. And so we said ‘*Monte Cristo*’.”



Adapting Dumas, an unwieldy if intoxicating writer, isn’t easy. “In our experience, in order to be most faithful to Alexandre Dumas, you have to betray him a great deal,” says Delaporte. “He writes lengthy descriptions, with many characters and many actions, and that is what is mesmerising when you’re reading. He’s very all-encompassing, but in order to be able to grasp that quality, you need to detach yourself and reinvent and innovate, keeping the spirit of his genius and his fantasy in a different language.”

Monte Cristo alone runs to 1200 pages, which presented a huge challenge. “Because they are so rich, his books, they’re vast and huge, like walking into a forest where you risk getting lost and you have to find the path in order to be able to distil and condense the

riches,” he continues. “Just scaling them down with reference to his ability for vast descriptions.”

Still, after bowing in Cannes last year, the three-hour film came away with glowing reviews. “Briskly paced and rousing acted” trumpeted trade paper *Variety*.



It was enough to draw in punters back home in France, who flocked to see this big-screen spectacle. “*Monte Cristo* is the biggest success in France for a non-comedy movie for about forty years now,” explains Delaporte. A quick glance at the numbers shows just how impressive it’s been: the two *Musketeers* films sold six million tickets in France all told, but *Monte Cristo*, by itself, welcomed nine million admissions in France, a staggering achievement as it beat out the likes of *Dune 2* and *Despicable Me 4*. By the end of 2024, the total worldwide gross was north of €100 million.

The film’s success, especially in its native France, marks a radical shift in audience tastes.

According to Delaporte and de La Patellière, it’s been a long time since such movies were in fashion. Not only what they call “the so-called ‘sword and cape’ film”, succulent, swashbuckling adventures, but also the glossy big-budget period piece that someone like esteemed French producer/director Claude Berri once made. Films like *Germinal* and

La Reine Margot, which Berri produced, and his directorial project, the beloved double bill of *Jean de Florette* and *Manon des Sources*, starring Gérard Depardieu.

"They came back in fashion thanks to producer Dimitri Rassam, who somehow is replacing the role that Claude had in the past," says de La Patellière. Rassam is the Paris-born producer behind Bourboulon's *The Three Musketeers* films and now *The Count of Monte Cristo*, who almost single-handedly brought audiences back to the glossy French period movies of old. "The genre that exists nowadays is the fusion of those two, in a way," de La Patellière adds.

Still, in their eyes, *Monte Cristo* is a very different experience than the two *Musketeers* movies. "They are very opposite films," says Delaporte, "and the only point of contact is the genre. Martin Bourboulon, who's the director of *The Three Musketeers*, he's a friend. He was aiming at making a Western, in the Sergio Leone style, while, in our case, we were more inclined in giving the flavour of the Technicolor Sixties adventure films. So, we're talking two different productions."

Their big coup here is casting Pierre Niney, the French actor who previously played fashion maestro Yves Saint Laurent in the 2014 biopic. "We thought he was the only one in the French cinema panorama able to age correctly for the film," says de La Patellière. "We just wanted one actor to play the 20-year-old naïve sailor, and also the harsh dark count when he was 40, and he was the only one capable of aging well, because he has the ability to have a wide palette of roles that he's able to play."



The actor has yet to really branch out into world cinema, though after the success of *Monte Cristo*, he must surely be on casting directors' radars. "I think he is the only one who's able and has in himself the ability to embrace the Anglo-Saxon method of acting, capable of undergoing physical transformation for the whole production," says Delaporte. "He learned to swim, to scuba dive, fencing, horse riding." Gaining and losing weight across the production, it marked "a big physical change" in order "to embody a character".

While these co-directors are now working on a television series, there are plans in place for their return to cinema, as they take on *The Accursed Kings* by French author Maurice Druon, a seven-book series about the French monarchy in the 14th Century. Set before the Hundred Years' War, the books have been called "the original *Game of Thrones*" by none other than George R.R. Martin, who authored that famed fantasy series. "Maybe we can do several movies, but we're going to try to make one," says de La Patellière. Production on the first book *The Iron King* is due to start in 2026. But, was it hard to decide what to do next after experiencing such a smash hit? "No," they shrug, in unison. "It's quite cool!"

***The Count of Monte Cristo* is in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Canberra cinemas from 10 April, and Adelaide, Perth, Gold Coast and Hobart from 17 April.**