

Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis (Welcome to the Sticks) (12A) 17th May 2010

Director: **Dany Boon**
France 2008

Running time : 106 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Kad Mera** (Philippe Abrams), **Dany Boon** (Antoine Bailleul), **Zoé Félix** (Julie Abrams), **Lorenzo Ausilia-Foret** (Raphaël Abrams), **Anne Marivin** (Annabelle Deconninck).

SCRIPT: **Dany Boon, Alexandre Charlot, Franck Magnier**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Pierre Aïm**. EDITING: **Luc Barnier, Julie Delord**. MUSIC: **Philippe Rombi**.

In 1966 French comedians Bourvil and Louis de Funès appeared in an average Second World War comedy directed by Gérard Oury called *La grande vadrouille*, and French box office history was made. This facile and slightly flabby film, roughly the equivalent of a Stanley Baxter or Norman Wisdom caper poking fun at the Bosch, became the film that sold the most tickets in France, and remained so for over four decades. Remained, that is, until in the summer of 2008 *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* drew over 20.2 million visits, a third of the country's population (although many no doubt saw it more than once!). It even did better than the most successful international, i.e. American, film of all time, *Titanic*.

Well I hope I haven't put you off already because I can say that *Bienvenue* is actually quite a bit more fun than *La grande vadrouille*, and a heck of a lot more than *Titanic*.

The film's principal character, Philippe, is a post office employee in Salon de Provence, a town not that far from Aix that most of us would probably sacrifice a couple of bedrooms to live in but with which he is unhappy. His wife would evidently like to be nearer the sea and he puts in a request for a transfer to the Côte d'Azur. The only trouble is he bolsters his request with the pretence that he is disabled (disabled applicants get priority for this highly sought after destination – clearly French post office employees are so well paid they can afford to move to the Riviera). Well, since this is a comedy, needless to say he fails to convince as a paraplegic and is posted north to the Pas de Calais for a number of years as punishment.

Now to appreciate this film's one and only joke, more or less, you must accept the premise that to live elsewhere than in the Midi is scarcely to be desired, but that to have to live in the mist-shrouded reaches of the extreme north is a fate

worse than living death, second only, one presumes, to living in Kent. The twin commonplaces that are bandied about concerning this part of France's great and varied land mass is that it is freezing cold and the locals are incomprehensible.

Nevertheless Philippe duly departs for work, humanely leaving his family in the south, and greets his new co-workers with the suspicion born of his prejudices. Like the American in Bill Forsyth's *Local Hero*, though, he soon finds that the folk up there ain't so bad after all, that it is possible to eat outside without dying of exposure, and that he might even try his hand at this Ch'timi, the regional version of French, when ordering at the local restaurant.

To spin out what might bring a premature happy ending to feature length, Boon, the film's writer-director and playing Antoine, chief Ch'ti pal of Philippe's, introduces the notion that he must pretend to his wife that all the fears were well grounded and that he is having a miserable time, for the dubious reason that their relationship has never been so good since he has been away, and that he must therefore perpetuate the separation! This premise, together with the fact that Philippe travels up and down each weekend by car (cue running gag with traffic cop), a journey of some 600 miles, rather than take the train (surely subsidised for post office workers!), is one of the harder of the film's pills to swallow.

Boon, who comes from the Pas de Calais himself, is reported as having said that he had been waiting to make this film for some time until he had sufficiently sharpened his game. Presumably he won't have to be in a hurry to make many more, so pleasing was this chauvinistic and remarkably old-fashioned effort.

David Clare