

La Belle Époque (15) France 2019

7 March 2022

DIRECTORS: **Nicolas Bedos**

(French with English subtitles) Running time: 115 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Daniel Auteuil** (Victor Drumond), **Guillaume Canet** (Antoine), **Doria Tillier** (Margo), **Fanny Ardant** (Marianne Drumond), **Pierre Arditi** (Pierre), **Denis Podalydès** (François), **Michael Cohen** (Maxime Drumond), **Jeanne Arènes** (Amélie), **Bertrand Poncet** (Adrien).

SCRIPT: **Nicolas Bedos**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Nicolas Bolduc**. EDITING: **Anny Danché, Stéphane Garnier, Florent Vassault**. MUSIC: **Nicolas Bedos, Anne-Sophie Versnaeyen**.

We all have our halcyon days, do we not, a time when the summers were long and full of promise, and relationships were laid down which marked our lives ever since? These gilded memories stand in opposition to what we have become: rueful, cantankerous, plagued by regret. (I don't speak for myself, you understand, but our hero, Victor Drumond.) Well, suppose those same personages and relationships presented themselves to us today, with what renewed intensity would we enjoy them, given our superior knowledge and appreciation of time's brief span!

Such is the premise of Nicolas Bedos's *comédie romantique* (so much more sophisticated in France than the 'rom-com'), which played out of competition at Cannes in 2019. To be clear, the title is the name of a café and alludes to that period of French history when suddenly milk was pasteurised, posters were by Toulouse Lautrec and chocolate and coffee were in plentiful supply, thanks to the nation's growing overseas empire. Or, to put it differently, a golden age between two brutal encounters with the Hun. Hence, a secondary meaning which takes us back to where we came in.

Drumond is a cartoonist who has somewhat lost his mojo, married to Marianne (so French and just a little fierce), played by the gorgeous Fanny Ardant (yes, that is her real name). She has rather had it with his moods and letting himself go, so that is exactly what she does. At which point enter Antoine, a successful entrepreneur who has created a niche market in recreating times and places for wealthy customers - much wealthier than Victor - to relive a profound moment in their lives. Now, he owes Victor a debt of gratitude for some past kindness, and resolves to offer him a freebie, in the hope that it will shake him out of his despondency and restore his chutzpah.

And what, I ask you, will be the signal defining moment of this man's past, what occurred at the Belle Époque café? He met Marianne, of course. (*Oh, c'est si romantique!*) The wrinkle is that the actress Antoine employs to play Marianne has, well, no wrinkles. Added to which she is so convincing, and it is all so well achieved *mise-en-scène* wise (lots of nods to filmmaking in this movie) that Victor falls in love all over again. (*Mais pas avec Marianne - ous!*)

Naturally they might just have foreseen that little catch, but this is all delightful stuff, as elegantly managed as the film-within-the-film's re-enactment, and suffused with golden hues of reds and greens, muted by skeins of cigarette smoke to evoke the key year of 1974 (some of our members might just recall!) Auteuil and Ardant are actors we have watched grow old over the years, though their screen careers don't go quite that far back, and they play their roles with the effortless poise of experienced pros. Bedos meanwhile allows us to be emotionally caught up in Drumond's predicament, while offering a playfully poignant reminder of what can be recaptured, and what cannot.

David Clare