

Le Dîner de Cons (15)

Director: Francis Veber

France 1998

7th January 2002

(Subtitles) Running time:- 80 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: Jacques Villeret (François Pignon), Thierry Lhermitte (Pierre Brochant), Francis Huster (Leblanc), Alexandra Vandernoot (Christine), Daniel Prévost (Cheval), Catherine Frot (Marlène), Edgar Givry (Cordier), Christian Pereira (Sorbier), Pétronille Moss (Mlle Blond), Daniel Martin (Messignac), Elvire Mellière (Gisèle), Philippe Brigaud (Tanner). SCRIPT- Francis Veber. PHOTOGRAPHY- Luciano Tovoli. EDITING- Georges Klotz. MUSIC- Vladimir Cosma. SOUNDTRACK - "Le temps ne fait rien à l'affaire" by/performed by Georges Brassens.

Imagine a diners' club whose members have one rotating responsibility: each month it must fall to one of them to bring as guest to the dinner an idiot, *un con*. That is the premise of this movie, and not an especially enticing one, you might think. But there is much more to Veber's misanthropic comedy than this.

To begin with, we must clarify what is meant by 'idiot'. The French word *con* itself has a nuance which is difficult to translate, but implies an almost bestial stupidity, impervious to the light of reason. In the terms of the present film, Villeret's idiot makes matchstick models of unimaginable accuracy, so there is also a sense of 'geek', if you like. But essentially he is the direct descendant of those characters, usually servants, to whom Molière's deluded anti-heroes entrusted the execution of their grand designs, with predictably catastrophic results.

Secondly, notice that the *con* of the title is in the plural, which at least allows for some ambiguity as to the identity of these idiots: are they the aggregate of all the monthly *invités* or does the dinner in question refer to this month's dinner, with the term being all-inclusive?

Thirdly, this is a French comedy and it resides firmly in the tradition already alluded to. In classic French comedy farce takes a back seat; character and *le mot* (or verbal wit) take precedence, and it is they that drive the plot. This internal logic is what impresses when viewing *Le Dîner de Cons*. Unlike, say, in *Fawlty Towers*, whose hero also despises the simple-minded Manuel while nevertheless employing him in his hotel, one is not subjected to eighty minutes of running and shouting because the exercise is cerebral rather than physical.

The film started life as a play, and the action is largely confined to the single set of Lhermitte's apartment. This in itself serves to prepare the viewer for the action ahead, allowing him to anticipate the limpet-like unshakeability of Villeret and admire the unravelling of the host's

existence through the good intentions of his guest. So when Lhermitte injures his back, Villeret insists on trying to help him reorganise his life with wife, mistress, tax inspector and so on.

Writer-director Francis Veber has done this sort of thing before. Not only did his screenplays for *l'Emmerdeur* and *La Valise* (both 1973) concern professionals whose plans were hindered by well-intentioned airheads; he was also responsible for a trio of comedies starring Gérard Depardieu and Pierre Richard in which the latter (a Gene Wilder type very popular in France and with whom Veber had a long association) acted as benevolent wrecker.

But for British filmgoers it was Veber who penned a string of French hits only to see them remade as US flops, of which the most successful was *La Cage aux Folles* (1978) remade as *The Birdcage* (1996), though *Trois Fugitifs* (1986) remade as *Three Fugitives* (1989), *Mon Père, ce héros* (1991) remade as *My Father the Hero* (1994) and *Le Jouet* (1976) remade as *The Toy* (1983) might also evoke memories less agreeable. And, would you know it, *Le Dîner de Cons* has just been remade as *Dinner for Shmucks* (sic) with Kevin Kline!

David Clare