

✓ **L'Homme du Train (12A)**

25th October 2004

Director: **Patrice Leconte**

France/UK/Germany/Japan 2002

Running time : 90 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Jean Rochefort** (Manesquier), **Johnny Hallyday** (Milan), **Jean-François Stévenin** (Luigi), **Charlie Nelson** (Max), **Pascal Parmentier** (Sadko).

SCRIPT: **Claude Klotz**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Jean-Marie Dreujou**. EDITING: **Joëlle Hache**. MUSIC: **Pascale Estève**.

A gunman arrives in town. He is the worse for wear. He has come to do a job and needs somewhere to stay during the planning stage. Problem: it is out of season and the hotel is closed. But he falls in with a retired schoolmaster who lives in a huge house and whose only visitors are the odd private pupil and old flame.

Such is the set-up for Leconte's deliciously dour entertainment, reminiscent of his *Monsieur Hire* in its portrait of the solitary life. Again he teams up with veteran French character actor Jean Rochefort, one of his frequent collaborators and in many ways the perfect Leconte hero – quirky, sardonic and erudite. Hallyday is the perfect foil. Not an actor as such, but an ageing rock star, he is best used as an exponent of the gallic smoulder, that cryptic, 'eyes screwed up through cigarette smoke' look they got from admiring James Dean so much. Here he is guarded and laconic, amused by Rochefort's garrulousness but disinclined to join in. He thinks he's got life sorted better than this dried up old intellectual, but they both have things to teach each other.

And that is the subject of the film really, how they interact, reveal (to themselves or to us) their regrets, their secret desires, and come away readier to face death. There is a dimension to the screenplay where they indulge in the fantasy of trading places – the bank robber is tired of travelling around, the teacher longs for adventure – but it is only a fantasy. They both know that things are the way they were meant to be. It is this acceptance that makes the climax bearable.

Into this two-hander Leconte mixes a number of staple ingredients: observant humour – who else would weave a whole little episode around French shopkeepers' annoying habit of saying: «Et avec ça?» after every purchase? – character comedy (Hallyday teaches one of Rochefort's private lessons with amusingly unorthodox

results), and the kind of musings on life, both funny and profound, which French cinema achieves better than any other. When one of the characters launches into a tirade, on classical composers for example, he contrives to be both epigrammatic and crude at the same time: we are shocked, yet at another level we are nodding in agreement.

How wonderfully refreshing to see two actors, both near the ends of their respective roads, effortlessly carry off a film like this! It is not an ambitious piece; it doubtless will make few critics' lists. But it is the kind of civilized show that the French cinema routinely turns out, where nothing much happens but there is so much detail to enjoy. Where else would you find the dramatic ingredients of a cop thriller mixed up with the thematic concerns of Marcel Proust or Alain-Fournier? No other nation has taken genre cinema seriously enough for such a development to be possible.

A closing thought: the scene in which Viviane (Isabelle Petit-Jacques) meets and takes an almost instant dislike to Milan sit uneasily with the rest of the film. She clearly frowns upon his intrusion into Manesquier's peacefully ordered life, though the rest of the film naturally celebrates it. This raises the question of the place of women in their lives (they have for differing reasons dismissed them) and whether they are, after all, that different. Their exchanges, whether of memories or items of wardrobe, smack of the kinds of gesture that might pass between old boys of the same school who never quite got on, but now discover they have more in common than they had suspected.

David Clare