

## **“Roman de Gare” Loses Its Breath with Its Identity**

By Paul Bachleitner

The lead of “Roman de Gare,” Dominique Pinon, is that vaguely familiar veteran actor you’ve seen in a number of French films, but can’t quite remember which ones and what role.

French director Jean-Pierre Jeunet has cast Pinon as a regular in the chorus of misfits and psychologically challenged characters that populate films such as “Amelie,” “The City of Lost Children,” and “Delicatessen.” Pinon will also occasionally star in American films, such as supporting Harrison Ford in the 1988 thriller, “Frantic,” or 1997’s “Alien: Resurrection.”

To confuse matters further is Pinon’s malleability. His face seems elastic or rubbery, almost as if there’s too much skin and he can stretch or scrunch it at will. He presses his lips together, and his chin folds in on itself like that of a bumbling fool. He narrows his eyes, and his forehead expands with enough malevolence to nearly touch his nose.

It’s rare that Pinon takes on a lead role, however, or any role that’s not very strange. But he plays the lead of “Roman de Gare.” And, although you couldn’t claim his character wasn’t at least a little strange, he’s not necessarily of the three-standard-deviations-away-from-normal, psychopathic killer variety. Or is he?

Credit “Roman de Gare” director Claude Lelouch, who had the insight to cast Pinon at the fulcrum of the film’s mystery. Pinon is perfect for the role of Pierre Laclos, a man who, like Pinon, has a very malleable identity. Within the first half hour, the film implies Laclos could be an escaped serial murderer, a novelist or an assistant to one, or a disgruntled grade school teacher who’s left his wife without word.

The film introduces Laclos performing magic tricks at a rural highway rest stop, as jump cuts from a radio program announce a magician-turned-killer has escaped from prison. Lelouch plays with viewers by cutting to shots of Laclos smiling at a little girl, whom Laclos has either befriended or stalked with a cute slight of hand and a coin.

A moment later, Lelouch leverages the scene to set up the first encounter between Laclos and Huguette, who’s Laclos’ next victim, beautiful foil, or pawn, depending on his ultimate motive.

The camera deftly captures Huguette from Laclos’ point of view through the window of the rest stop. She and her fiancé have just pumped a tank of gas as well as the intensity level of an argument that has risen to vitriolic proportions. Her fiancé jumps into the car and drives off amidst an exchange of shouts and curses. The act’s insensitivity leaves Huguette stumbling with tears and disbelief towards the rest stop.

Huguette is a composite of aging beauty, uncontrollable passion, and mental thick-headedness as played by Audrey Dana. She resists Laclos’ initial attempts to comfort her with card tricks and kind words. But as night fades to dawn and her boyfriend doesn’t return, desperation overcomes reason and she accepts a ride from Laclos.

Laclos tells Huguette he is the secretary to Judith Ralitzer, a best-selling novelist played by the legendary Fanny Ardant. Huguette believes this until Laclos explains he was lying and actually works at a school where Ralitzer once delivered a speech. Pinon's changeable face creases inwards at the lips, making it impossible to determine lie from truth.

The deep mascara-lined circles beneath Dana's eyes explain well enough why Huguette might take a ride from a stranger. But Dana's fiery line deliveries help sell Huguette's subsequent lack of discretion in asking Laclos to take her to her parents' home on a farm and pretend he's her fiancé. Apparently other fights with husbands and fiancés have left her returning home without a man before, and her family's scorn would be unbearable if she should do so once again.

The film manages to surmount this first serious, and somewhat sexist, strain of credibility. He accepts the offer to begin a strong second act that explores him and Huguette in great depth as they weave an artificial identity for him on the fly in front of her family.

A scene where Laclos accompanies Huguette's daughter to go fishing during the afternoon evidences at once his malleable identity and Huguette's lack of discretion. When the two are late for dinner, Huguette suddenly realizes she knows nothing about Laclos and fears he may have harmed her daughter. But when the two return home laughing like friends, Huguette's fear becomes jealousy and boils over as her insecurities mount about the relationship between the two.

Unfortunately, the second crashes to a close when Huguette's real fiancé returns. The plot circles in on itself to explain an opening sequence with Ardant's Ralitzer claiming innocence to an accusatory inspector. A year passes with a change of camera angle. A resolution scene in the inspector's office shortly before the end can't cover up plot holes as numerous as Laclos' various identities.

It's too bad because "Roman de Gare" had something interesting to offer that was surely lost amidst the number of unnecessary plot gimmicks that punctuate the film.

I give it two out of four stars.