

The Closet

A new comedy from French director Francis Veber can be happily looked for every couple of years. Messr. Veber has written and directed numerous French *bons-bons* that have played well in their original versions and then been often adapted into American films, pieces such as *The Tall Blond Man With One Black Shoe*, *The Toy* (from "Le Jouet"), *The Birdcage* (from "La Cage aux Folles"), and *Three Fugitives* (from "Les Fugitifs"). His previous movie from 1997, "Le Diner de Cons," is being looked at for an upcoming Kevin Kline vehicle called *Dinner for Schmucks*.

His latest, *The Closet* (Le Placard) is about a straight fellow pretending to "come out" as gay to revivify his dormant life. Pignon (Daniel Auteuil) is an accountant at a Paris condom factory, a man so profoundly drab that he gets simply pushed out of the company group photo without being missed. His overall nullity has cost him his wife, his teenage son, and--as the picture opens--his job. He's contemplating suicide from his apartment window when a small cat and a psychologist neighbor Belone (Michel Aumont) save him. Belone, lonely himself, suggests a way out for this sad sack: let word out that he is gay and people will react differently to him--offering him a new life.

Indeed, though Pignon acts exactly the same as before, all those around him *do* come to see him differently. The company director Kopel (Jean Rochefort) wants to be politically correct (fire a gay in a condom factory?) and quickly rehires him; his son Franck (Stanislas Cervillen) all of a sudden wants to hang with him; his homophobic nemesis at work Santini (Gerard Depardieu) must clumsily make "nice" with him, and his immediate boss, the once distant beauty Mlle. Bertrand (Michele Laroque) becomes intrigued with Pignon though skeptical about his change in sexual orientation. All these shifts are briskly catalogued, from wry to hilarious, ringing clever changes on any number of gay stereotypes. A nice touch is that the one genuinely *gay* person in the entire film is the sober, thoughtful Belone.

Veber's comedy depends on a complex layering of incident. He typically begins with a modest premise--usually based on some kind of humiliation (dull straight guy pretends to be gay)--then another layer of confusion or complexity is added, then another, until you are galloping along at an absurd pace (as in *The Birdcage*) with the jokes flying. It is much like the technique of the earlier French farceur/dramatist Feydeau. The knockout joke in *The Closet* takes place on the factory floor where Pignon and Mlle. Bertrand are getting it on just as Kopel leads a group of Japanese visitors through the plant and...but you should see the picture for the kicker.

This is a deft Gallic Revenge of the Nerd, and watch for *The Closet* to be optioned to Hollywood any minute and become Americanized (perhaps with Jim Carrey as Pignon?)--and probably less funny.

(The film is rated "R" for sexual situations and suggestiveness.)

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