

Ridicule

A scandal-ridden, superficial, and socially isolated capital city, one both ignorant and uncaring about the world outside, obsessed with “access,” overridden with sycophantic aides and turgid bureaucrats, and presided over by a changeable and portly potentate... No--no! We're not talking about Washington, D.C., but rather Versailles circa 1783 in the reign of the doomed Louis XVI as depicted in the new French film *Ridicule*.

The film takes its title from one of the most valued talents of that cosseted court: the ability to either impose--or fend off--the clever verbal put-down, the ability to heap ridicule on the other while avoiding it for oneself. On such cruel and trivial games was the shaky French monarchy grounded.

The film is done as a *bildungsroman* of young Gregoire Ponceludon de Malavoy (Charles Berling), an honest provincial engineer and minor lord who, in seeking funding to drain a fetid swamp, decides to appeal to the court. His petitions go nowhere, but he is befriended by a court regular, the kindly Marquis de Bellegarde (Jean Rochefort) and his family, who coaches him in the wiles of getting along with those around the sovereign. Thrown into sessions with other, more practiced, courtiers, Ponceludon finds he has a natural gift for the *bon mot*. His quips win him favor, especially with the wicked widow Madame de Blayac (Fanny Ardant), and eventually gain him access to the King (Urban Canelier) and the promise of assistance on his project.

The heart of the story is the struggle in young Ponceludon's soul between his worthy desire to help his countrymen and his initiation into the heady salons (and bedrooms) of the court: the truly noble vs. the Nobles. His struggle is complicated by his growing ardor for the Marquis's daughter Mathilde (Judith Godreche), a simple girl with a scientific rather than a cynical bent, until Ponceludon--himself the object of ridicule--finally walks out of the court on his own terms.

Director Patrice Leconte's introduction to this fickle, feckless world wants to show both its glamour as well as the heartlessness at its core. He also seems to want to make a moral point about how fragile was the regime that would begin cracking to pieces a few years hence. The glamour is amply shown in regal halls and sitting rooms, in billowing drapes and lush taffetas, all of these nicely undercut with coarse wigs, painted faces, and powder covering the stench of the noblesse (the latter made especially vivid in a cloud of talcum that coats Madame de Blayac in her bed chamber). Leconte's moral center is, of course, Ponceludon and Mathilde, youths with both intelligence and a sense of service to others, who promise a future beyond the *ancien regime*.

Charles Berling, appearing in his first film role, makes a very convincing Ponceludon, earnest yet clever; you believe he can be both a good-hearted soul *and* the soul of wit. Godreche, also making her debut, is sweet and sensible, an appropriately refreshing contrast to the vapidty going on all about her. The veteran Jean Rochefort is a delight as Bellegarde, all wrapped in courtly arcana yet never less than sympathetic. The radiant Ardant, most recently seen in *Colonel Chabert* (and wasted in the remake of *Sabrina*), seems to relish the role of the courtesan Madame de Blayac which allows her

to be alternately kittenish and contemptuous, yet completely alluring. Among a number of fine featured players, Bernard Giraudeau stands out as the Abbot of Vilecourt, a conceited clergyman who becomes a supreme object of ridicule just at a moment of triumph.

The film *could* lose something in translation for some filmgoers. The problem is that the film's examples of wit, which abound, don't necessarily translate. To one reading subtitles, the supposedly brittle epigrams may seem tepid or thin, lacking the economy and bite of the original French. This is not a minor matter, since such banter is supposed to help define this society. Still, *Ridicule* (which has been named as France's official nominee for Academy Award consideration) is a handsome and well-paced motion picture and will recall for movie fans some of the spirit of other worthy films of the period such as *Amadeus* and, especially, *Dangerous Liaisons*.

("Ridicule" is rated "R" for nudity, sexual situations and display of organs.)

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