

La Vie de Gérard

by Mark Harris

Depardieu: A Biography by Paul Chutkow. Alfred A. Knopf, 368 pages, \$24.

This biography of France's most luminous contemporary star is a book of considerable, if somewhat accidental, interest. A foreign correspondent who claims to have "reported from 30 countries on five continents," Paul Chutkow is neither a film scholar nor a purveyor of celebrity trash. "Without fear or favour," this frequent stringer for *The New York Times* writes in a middle-brow manner for a middle-class readership that feels happiest when occupying the middle ground. Although he lived in France for twelve years, he reflects on Gallic culture like a responsible tourist, always referring to Michelin road maps whenever he loses his way.

This last characteristic accounts for the most irritating passages in the book. Chutkow will never advance an opinion himself if he can get someone else to express it for him. Thus, he has "young cinema whiz" Michael Barker observe that "it is almost unheard of for a foreign actor to win best actor or actress [Oscar] for a film that was not originally done in English" when a five-minute perusal of Academy Award statistics would have told him the same thing. At times he writes as if he's never seen a French movie in his life: "Because of its humanism and uncompromising realism, *Jeux interdits* [sic] is considered one of the masterpieces of French cinema." Unfortunately, on the rare occasions when Chutkow actually does advance his own views, we often wish that he hadn't. Jean-Paul Rappeneau "one of France's most refined and meticulous auteurs"? Surely even the director of *Cyrano de Bergerac* would see himself, rather, as one of the commercial film industry's most skilled master craftsmen?

Elsewhere, Chutkow refers to the "ancient French" spoken in *Cyrano de Bergerac*—a play contemporary with *The Importance of Being Earnest*. When talking about the events of May 1968, he conveniently neglects to mention that many of the arts students setting up barricades in the street were doing so not out of bourgeois boredom but because their schools were in imminent danger of being taken over by Gaullist

apparatchiks. This last omission—like the author's misleading portrait of 1900, Bernardo Bertolucci's epic, pro-Communist romance—seems to be less a simple error of fact than the manifestation of a timid but consistent distaste for left-wing political involvement in the dramatic arts.

Depardieu, in other words, unfolds against a backdrop that is barely recognizable and frequently wrong. But because the author got to know Gérard Depardieu quite well on the personal level, the foreground portrait of this most unlikely star feels both credible and convincing. Chutkow encountered his subject not only on the screen and under the controlled circumstances of the formal interview, but at home, on the set, and *au table* with family and friends. After introductory scene-setting, the author describes, in fairly strict chronological order, Depardieu's meteoric rise from tongue-tied apprentice printer with semicriminal leanings to the toast of two cinematic continents. He does a fine job of evoking Gérard's well-meaning but dangerously distant parents—especially his alcoholic, analphabetic, and inarticulate father Dédé. Chutkow's re-creation of the small-town ambience of Chateauroux seems similarly trustworthy, except perhaps in its emphasis on the overwhelming importance to the community of its attached U.S. NATO base. While no one can deny that Gérard's lifelong infatuation with America is rooted in his early encounters with gum-chewing GIs, this biographer is almost colonialist in his smug insistence on the benefits brought to this "benighted" part of the world by his goodhearted, all-powerful countrymen.

Chutkow's "shirtsleeve" scenes of his star subject stomping through his wine cellar, arguing with director Claude Berri on the set of *Germinal*, and searching for just the right sort of chicken in a little *boucherie* in Belgium are all three-dimensional and sharply visualized, but they are not the heart of this book. *Depardieu* boasts two superb chapters. "Dr. Mozart" describes how Gérard acquired his great, booming voice with the aid of selected musical tapes. Dr. Alfred Tomatis, one of French medicine's major mavericks, believes that a

parent's voice can be as damaging to a child "as an exploding bombshell," while the "insanely" rational French language can therapeutically be undermined by generous doses of Mozart. Regardless of the general validity of these theories, Tomatis successfully played Annie Sullivan to Depardieu's Helen Keller.

"The Time Affair," *Depardieu's* second great chapter, reads like a legal brief composed by Alan Dershowitz with help from Clarence Darrow. With a rigor absent from the rest of the book, it seeks to discover whether its "client" did or did not confess to participating in gang rapes at the age of 9. Chutkow "cross-examines" *Time* editor/author Richard Corliss and freelance interviewer Veronica Foote-Greenwell with such grace and skill, he wound up convincing this judge, at least, that the accused was innocent.

Invaluable in the *Time* chapter, in other places Chutkow's fondness for his subject is not always an asset. His account of the extramarital affair that almost wrecked the star's 24-year marriage to Elisabeth Guignot is even more cursory and veiled than the coverage provided by *Paris-Match*, a notoriously shallow photoweekly. One can't help wondering if there were other situations when the author's personal loyalty inspired him to look the other way.

The book concludes with an up-to-date filmography. Few of the films are described in any depth, and Chutkow's uncertain mastery of aesthetic relativity drives him to overrate some of his subject's roles (the eponymous *Cyrano*; Bernard Granger, the *maquisard* actor in Truffaut's *Le Dernier Métro*) and to underestimate others (the hapless husband in Blier's *Trop belle pour toi*, the brutal bartender/poet in Berri's *Uranus*). It seems unlikely that this is the last word on the life and works of Gérard Depardieu, the two-fisted, poet-voiced, kindhearted flower-sniffer with the long hair and gourmand's belly. On the other hand, it is unquestionably the best biography to be written thus far, and for this we should be—moderately—grateful.



Mark Harris is a freelance writer in Vancouver, British Columbia.