

C'EST DU DÉJÀ VU... AU CINÉMA

Les Compères is one of my favorite films to use in French classes to stimulate discussion and add comic relief near the end of the academic year. In the spring of 1997 the American remake of the film, *Fathers' Day*, happened to come to the local theater during the time we were discussing the French film in class. We compared the two films on the basis of cultural contexts, plot differences, and character interaction, deciding in the end that Gérard Depardieu, playing the macho investigative reporter, and Pierre Richard, the frizzy-haired, neurotic ex-school teacher, have a comic chemistry that cannot be matched, even by Robin Williams and Billy Crystal.

Depardieu and Richard teamed up in two other French comedies that became American remakes. The first was *La Chèvre* (1981) about the accident-prone daughter of a Parisian CEO who sends a tough detective, Depardieu, to Mexico to find his missing daughter. When he fails, her father makes a second attempt by sending along the company accountant (Richard), a bumbling airhead, on the premise that it takes one to find one. The mismatched sleuths encounter more than they bargained for as they stumble their way through situations that offer clues, comedy, and eventually romance. The remake, *Pure Luck*, loses its timing, has long scenes that are not funny, and seems disorganized. The third film with Depardieu and Richard, *Les Fugitifs* (1986), also based on a parent-child theme, became *Three Fugitives* with Nick Nolte and Martin Short, who come closest to reproducing the comic mix found in the French version.

It is surprising that Hollywood waited until 1996 to create a remake of *La Cage aux folles* (1978), which had great reviews and financial success when the original version was released in the U.S. in 1979. Nominated for two Oscars in 1980, it was presented as a Broadway musical three years later. In the meantime the French were busy creating two sequels by the same name in 1980 and 1985, both disappointing attempts to carry on the original theme of the gay odd couple. Mike Nichols' remake, *The Birdcage*, starring Robin Williams and Nathan Lane, brings a contemporary context to the farce with references to gays in the military, legal rights, and Robert Mapplethorpe, but lacks certain humorous aspects found in the conservative political context of the French version.

It is difficult to discuss American

remakes of French films without sounding like a Francophile snob. Convinced that I am biased in favor of the French original, I was relieved to come across a comment by Roger Ebert, movie critic for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, who remarked that there seems to be "a trend in which Hollywood buys French comedies and experiments on them to see if they can be made into English with all the humor taken out." This is partly true for the films just mentioned, but there is an exception. *Trois Hommes et un couffin* inspired the remake *Three Men and a Cradle*, which is even funnier than the original because the comic rhythm is better suited to an American audience. Hollywood seems to have an affinity for French comic films. Can remakes of *Gazon maudit* and *Les Visiteurs* be far behind?

Another film I enjoy using in class is *Le Retour de Martin Guerre*, an engaging historical romance based on an authentic 16th-century trial that is full of suspense until the very end. Martin (Depardieu), the young husband of Bertrande (Natalie Baye), leaves home to fight for the king, returning nine years later a changed man. Is it Martin or an impostor? Set in a peasant village, the film deals with superstition, deception, greed, and true love. Very successful in the original version, *Martin Guerre* inspired an American adaptation that is disappointing unless you put the French film out of your mind. In *Sommersby* with Richard Gere and Jodie Foster, the returning husband is much less credible, the historical context has been changed to the Civil War, and recurring themes are Yankee-Dixie rivalries, tobacco farming, and racism. The plot becomes more complex and suspenseful but with significant changes from the original.

Ten years earlier Gere starred in *Breathless*, a remake of the classic French film *À Bout de souffle*, which, in my opinion, cannot be successfully remade because of its unique qualities, including the photography, the ambiance of Paris, and the main characters played by the homely, boxer-nosed Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg, an American actress living in France.

A French film that has enjoyed remarkable success in the U.S. is *La Femme Nikita*, a fast-paced, violent thriller based on the story of a female condemned murderer who agrees to be retrained by the government as an anti-terrorist agent. After the film was

nominated for two awards in the original version, Hollywood quickly exploited its potential in the remake *Point of No Return*. The success of this film was followed by a unique event. *La Femme Nikita* was made into a weekly American series shown on the USA network (Sundays, 10 p.m./EST) with the original French title. (*Nikita* is used in Canada to avoid confusing the series with the film.) *La Femme Nikita* now has two major Web sites and chat groups to discuss the activities and love interests of the main characters.

Espionage treated in a lighter vein is the subject of *Le Grand Blond avec une chaussure noire* in which Pierre Richard plays an absent-minded violinist who is mistakenly identified as an enemy agent because of his bizarre habits that suggest premeditated counter-espionage ploys. The farce was transformed into *The Man with One Red Shoe*, the CIA playing the role of the French secret service and Tom Hanks the unwitting pawn of the not-so-intelligent agents.

At the end of the 1955 French thriller *Les Diaboliques* the audience is advised not to reveal the final part to those who haven't seen the film. When Sharon Stone and Isabelle Adjani pooled their talents in the 1996 American remake, *Diabolique*, the result was disappointing but had the good effect of inspiring viewers to see the re-release of the original in a restored version, which is far superior to the remake for reasons I can't explain without revealing the *dénouement*.

The prize for silliest film should be shared equally by *Un Indien dans la ville* and the remake *Jungle 2 Jungle*, both based on the story of a young boy raised by his divorced mother in the Amazon jungle. At the age of 12, he is returned to his father, a businessman whose "jungle" is the city. The cultural adaptation of the son is revealed through a series of gags that are not particularly funny.

Considering the French government's concern with imposing quotas on the number of American films that can be shown in cinemas and on television in France, it must be all the more galling (no pun intended) to see mediocre versions of their own creations returning to the marquee.

Lois Vines
Ohio University

American Remakes of French Films

French Film	American Remake
<i>Boudou sauvé des eaux</i>, 1932	<i>Down and Out in Beverly Hills</i>, 1986
Michel Simon, Marcelle Hainia <i>Les Diaboliques</i>, 1955 (re-released in 1994)	Nick Nolte, Richard Dreyfuss <i>Diabolique</i>, 1996
Simone Signoret, Véra Clouzot <i>À Bout de souffle</i>, 1959	Sharon Stone, Isabelle Adjani <i>Breathless</i>, 1983
Jean-Paul Belmondo, Jean Seberg <i>Le Grand Blond avec une chaussure noire</i>, 1972	Richard Gere, Valerie Kaprisky <i>The Man with One Red Shoe</i>, 1985
Pierre Richard, Bernard Blier <i>Cousin, Cousine</i>, 1975	Tom Hanks, Dabney Coleman <i>Cousins</i>, 1989
Marie-Christine Barrault, Victor Lanoux <i>La Cage aux folles</i>, 1978 (II, 1980; III, 1985)	Isabella Rossellini, Ted Danson <i>The Birdcage</i>, 1996
Michel Serrault, Ugo Tognazzi <i>La Chèvre</i>, 1981	Robin Williams, Nathan Lane <i>Pure Luck</i>, 1991
Gérard Depardieu, Pierre Richard <i>Le Retour de Martin Guerre</i>, 1982	Martin Short, Danny Glover <i>Sommersby</i>, 1993
Gérard Depardieu, Nathalie Baye <i>Les Compères</i>, 1983	Richard Gere, Jodie Foster <i>Fathers' Day</i>, 1997
Gérard Depardieu, Pierre Richard <i>Trois Hommes et un couffin</i>, 1985	Robin Williams, Billy Crystal <i>Three Men and a Baby</i>, 1987
Michel Boujenah, Roland Giraud <i>Les Fugitifs</i>, 1986 (not available on videocassette)	Tom Selleck, Ted Danson <i>Three Fugitives</i>, 1989
Gérard Depardieu, Pierre Richard <i>La Femme Nikita</i>, 1991	Nick Nolte, Martin Short <i>Point of No Return</i>, 1993
Anne Parillaud, Marc Duret <i>La Totale!</i>, 1991	Bridget Fonda, Gabriel Byrne <i>True Lies</i>, 1994
Thierry Lhermite, Miou-Miou Curtis <i>Un Indien dans la ville</i>, 1994	Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jamie Lee <i>Jungle 2 Jungle</i>, 1997
Thierry Lhermite, Patrick Timsit	Tim Allen, Martin Short