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**Friday November 29th, 2019**

**Return of the Hero (12a)**

**Dir: Laurent Tirard**

**Starring: Jean Dujardin, Mélanie Laurent, Noémie Merlant**

**Sponsor: Andrew Howard**

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**Synopsis:** Burgundy, during the Napoleonic Wars. Captain Neuville is about to marry Pauline Beaugrand when he is called away to fight in Austria. He fails to write as promised and Pauline falls ill. In order to save her, her older sister Elisabeth writes fake letters inventing Neuville's war exploits. Her gullible family are entranced by her fictional creation, but as the war comes to an end she 'kills' Neuville so that Pauline can marry her shy suitor Nicolas. However, Neuville returns as a scruffy tramp, confessing to Elisabeth that he deserted. She bribes him to go away but he comes back, having smartened himself up, and proceeds to charm everyone around. He exploits the men with crooked financial schemes based on a fictional diamond mine and seduces the women. He survives the various plots that Elisabeth engineers to drive him away, including a duel with Nicolas and an encounter with a general in Napoleon's army. When Cossacks encircle the Beaugrand home, Neuville appears to find the courage to fight them (in fact, he is saved by the arrival of the army), and even Elisabeth believes him to be a true hero. The two are married, but he is called to war again. As he and a group of soldiers leave for the front, he rides in a different direction, deserting again.

The soldier returning from the war shrouded in mystery is a familiar theme in French literature and cinema, as seen in such classics as *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1982) and *Colonel Chabert* (1994). Laurent Tirard's *Return of the Hero* turns the topic on its head and reworks it as farce. Where the two earlier films showed the protagonist - played by Gérard Depardieu in both cases - as someone dignified in the face of suspicion and hostility, *Return of the Hero* focuses on a deserter, Captain Neuville (Jean Dujardin), who revels in being a sham and a coward.

The story takes place in Burgundy in the early 19th century, during the Napoleonic Wars. Neuville is engaged to Pauline Beaugrand (Noémie Merlant), the younger daughter of a well-to-do family, just as he is called to war. She falls gravely ill when she does not hear from him, which prompts her older sister Elisabeth (Mélanie Laurent) to start writing letters full of his fanciful exploits, including eventually news of his 'heroic' death. When Neuville returns as a squalid tramp who admits that he deserted, Elisabeth watches in horror as her family and circle of friends - including the now married Pauline - succumb to his lies and caddish charm.

From then on, the comic sparring between Neuville and Elisabeth constitute the backbone of the film and the best thing about it. Elisabeth's sharp wit recalls Jane Austen heroines as she tries various machinations to remove the boorish Neuville from her entourage. Laurent and Dujardin's excellent comic timing recalls the Hollywood screwball comedy of the 1930s and some light French comedies of the 1970s. Jean-Paul Rappeneau's comic washbuckler *The Scoundrel* (971) comes to mind, with Dujardin a good fit for Jean-Paul Belmondo with a similar blend of humour and dashing good looks.

At first sight, *Return of the Hero* exposes the cowardice, immorality and vulgarity of its 'hero', contrasting it unfavourably with Elisabeth's principled intelligence but it doesn't sustain this feminist narrative to the end. Elisabeth's cleverness is undermined by the suggestion that she is simply jealous of her sister. Pauline's crass stupidity is depicted without irony - in a



particularly low moment, she pursues Neuville sexually only to be rejected, and then relishes being slapped by her hitherto doormat of a husband. The brilliant Elisabeth herself relents when told by Neuville that he faces the firing squad for deserting, after she has introduced him to a general who really fought in the war in order to reveal his masquerade.

At that point, in a jarring change of tone, Neuville delivers a harrowing monologue on the horrors of war. Even if one can admire Dujardin's skill in performing this emotional U-turn convincingly, the film's critique of machismo is thereby nullified. The emotional truth of what he describes is not used to critique war but to justify his desertion and, by extension, his entire behaviour, from exploitative financial scams to philandering. He is a hero after all! And the heroine can marry him. The lack of narrative coherence is echoed by the stylistic mishmash of the film which hovers between costume drama, romantic comedy and vaudeville farce, and, more problematically, mixes period prettiness and contemporary dialogues without offering either historical vision or true modernity.

#### Credits

<b>Captain Neuville</b>	Jean Dujardin
<b>Elisabeth</b>	Mélanie Laurent
<b>Pauline</b>	Noémie Merlant
<b>Nicolas</b>	Christophe Montenez
<b>Madame Beaugrand</b>	Evelyne Buyle
<b>Monsieur Beaugrand</b>	Christian Bujeau
<b>Monsieur Dunoyer</b>	Laurant Bateau
<b>Monsieur Loiseau</b>	Jean-Michel Lahmi
<b>Director</b>	Laurent Tirard
<b>Screenplay</b>	Laurent Tirard, Grégoire Vigneron
<b>Director of Photography</b>	Guillaume Schiffman
<b>Editing</b>	Yann Malcor
<b>Music</b>	Mathieu Lamboley
<b>Sound</b>	Éric Devulder
<b>Art direction</b>	Françoise Dupertuis
<b>Costume</b>	Pierre-Jean Larroque

**France/Belgium 2017. 90 mins**

#### Another View

Mélanie Laurent and Jean Dujardin star as a pair of warring con artists in this French period romcom from the writer-director of *Le Petit Nicolas*, Laurent Tirard. Full to the brim with Gallic charm, it's an engaging and likeable farce that has unexpected emotional depth.

The film begins in 1809, as suave, smooth-talking Captain Neuville (Dujardin) is called to the front, leaving his wealthy future bride Pauline (Noémie Merlant) heartbroken. Concerned for her bratty younger sister's health, Elisabeth (Laurent) fakes a series of letters from Neuville, detailing both his love for Pauline and his heroic exploits and eventually killing him off, after which Pauline marries foppish nobleman Nicolas (Christophe Montenez).

However, three years later Neuville returns, reduced to the status of a bum having deserted the army out of cowardice. When he learns of Elisabeth's letters, he visits her aristocratic family, seeking to cash in on his heroic reputation and Elisabeth can't expose him without revealing her own deception. The ensuing cat-and-mouse game forms the heart of the film, as Neuville continually side-steps Elisabeth's attempts to see him off and she resorts to ever more desperate measures.

With a perpetual twinkle in his eye and that dazzling smile, Dujardin turns the charm up to eleven as Neuville, generating strong, sparky chemistry with Laurent in the process and effortlessly winning over the audience, despite his duplicitous nature and spinelessness (his drawn-out examination of two pistols in a duel scene is one of several comic highlights). Intriguingly, the script (co-written by Tirard and Grégoire Vigneron) avoids some of the expected plot developments in favour of a resolution that's slyly subversive and surprisingly moving.

Tirard's control of the material is assured throughout as he delivers a series of very funny visual and verbal gags with impressive comic timing, knowing just when to pull back if things are heading over the top. In addition, he's a dab hand at exploiting audience expectations: the film's most powerful moment works precisely because you're anticipating a laugh that never comes.

### **Matthew Turner: The List**

#### **Reminders**

Half season membership is still available for the modest sum of £25. It offers access to all the films in our programme from January to the end of the season and is ideal as a Christmas present or as a very cost-effective way for those people who've come as guests to continue to enjoy the range of films we have.

Go to our website to take advantage of the offer. Here's the link <http://www.lincolnfilmssociety.com/2019/11/02/lfs-half-year-membership-ret urns/>

#### **Nominations for the classic film**

Members will be asked to choose the classic film in January, from a short list drawn up by the programming committee. There are still a few spaces left on the long list for any member wishing to nominate a title.

Not sure what to suggest? There are plenty of ideas available at the BFI, the Independent Cinema Office (ICO) and Park Circus, all of whom provide films in the DCP format. Details are here

BFI: <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/bfi-film-releases>

ICO: <https://www.independentcinemaoffice.org.uk/distribution/>

Park Circus:

[https://www.parkcircus.com/explore\\_films?query=&format=&genre=&deca de=&territory=&language=&rights=&studio=](https://www.parkcircus.com/explore_films?query=&format=&genre=&deca de=&territory=&language=&rights=&studio=)

#### **Christmas and the New Year**

The Society will be closing down after this evening's film for the Christmas and New Year period. We return on January 3rd, with a gem of a film (see box for details).

The Committee would like to thank everyone who has supported us over 2019, whether as a member, a sponsor or a guest. We wish you a very Happy Christmas and a film-filled New Year.

#### **Our next screening Friday January 3rd 2020. 7.30pm Woman at War (Iceland 2018. Cert 12a)**

Director Benedikt Erlingsson is a renowned theatre and TV comedy performer in his native Iceland. He made quite an impact with his first feature, *Of Horses and Men* (shown by LFS in 2015). This, his second feature, is an ecological drama with so many good things to recommend it: stunning photography, that quirky Icelandic sense of humour, a bang up-to-date theme and a fine central performance by Halldóra Geirhardsdóttir as Halla, a mild-mannered middle-aged woman who runs a choir by day and seems the soul of respectability but who is also 'Mountain Woman', a committed eco-warrior and the talk of the land for her determined efforts to stop an industrial multi-national wrecking the Icelandic countryside. Greta Thunberg, you have a rival!!