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- Radio
- Travel
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- Fun
- News
- Lifestyle
- Personals
- Forums
- Blogs

13 December 2007 20:50

- Culture
- Books
- Film & TV
 - DVD Reviews
 - Film Reviews
 - Interviews
 - Television
 - Features
 - Inside Hollywood
 - Film Forum
- Nightlife
- Music
- My GaydarNation
- What's New
- Downloads
- Competitions
- E-Cards
- Newsletters
- Contact
- Magazines
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 - Perez Hilton
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- Privacy Policy
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Louis Garrel: Love Songs

12 December 2007

In Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* Louis Garrel spent a lot of time sexually experimenting with his sister, played by Bond girl Eva Green, and an American film student, played by Michael Pitt, while Paris went up in flames during the student riots of May '68.

In Christophe Honoré's *Ma Mere* he had an incestuous relationship with his mother, Isabelle Huppert, who initiated him into the world of sado-masochistic sex.

Considering his choice of film roles I was surprised to find that he's a bit of a joker. He turns up late claiming he'd just come from a meeting with the French Ambassador, tells fibs throughout the interview and gives one-word answers to many of the questions. The jocular personality that refused to allow his suicidal siblings to get him down in *Dans Paris* is closer to the Garrel sitting in front of me than the confused young man in *The Dreamers* and *Ma Mere*.

Garrel has a huge presence on screen and in person. He's tall, boisterous, like an oversized puppy, and his angular Gallic face is much better looking in real life.

He still has the charming and not rather frustrating naiveté of youth, but somehow manages to find common ground with the seriously literary Honoré. The pair have worked together on three films and are about to embark on their fourth.

Rachael Scott caught up with the rising French star and confirmed sex symbol to talk about *Chansons d'Amour (Love Songs)*, where his character starts a relationship with a man after his female lover suddenly dies, and why he's always taking his clothes off in the movies! The interview took place at the Ciné Lumière where he and other members of the cast sang numbers from the film for a live audience.

Are you going to sing tonight?
I think so. Are you going to come?

I can't because my boiler broke down this morning and someone is coming round to fix it. What is a 'boiler'?

The thing that makes the water and the heating get hot. Will you be nervous singing live in front of an audience?
Yeah. A bit. It will be difficult. [Looks very bored]

Were you nervous about singing in *Love Songs*?
Yeah, yeah. [Garrel is muttering so quietly I ask him to attach the microphone to his T-shirt, which he does and then puts my dictaphone in his pocket!]

So how did you overcome your nervousness?
I dunno. [Fidgets with his woolly hat]

You don't know what you did?
No. [Laughs and fidgets with a cushion]

Okay. More than one word answers would be good otherwise it's going to be a very short interview.
[Jumps upright] No. No. [Starts to concentrate]

So if you're nervous about singing why did you want to be in a musical?
Because I wanted to work with Christophe (Honoré) again.

How would you describe your character's reaction to his girlfriend's death?
I worked with his feelings of guilt. I felt that he was always asking himself 'What *didn't* you do that could have saved her?' When you're in love with somebody you have this feeling of responsibility towards them. You might have a narcissistic idea that without you the person is really nothing. Without you they can't live, but when you split up with somebody you see that they can be with someone else. It's hard.

Why do you think your character had a relationship with a man when he was straight?
I believe that when you are in a bad situation in your life and when you meet somebody who falls completely in love with you it's a miracle. I think you go where the affection is. So Ishmael went with a man even though he's not homosexual because he's responding to this big affection towards him during a difficult time.

"I believe that when you are in a bad situation in your life and when you meet somebody who falls completely in love with you it's a miracle. [My Character] went with a man even though he's not homosexual because he's responding to this big affection towards him during a difficult time."

Do you approach a love scene with a man differently to how you approach one with a woman?
No. I try to imagine myself as a spectator of the movie because I'm not really interested in sex scenes. It makes me uncomfortable. But the sex scenes I love in the movies are ones where the actress is completely comfortable and not thinking about the way she looks or the way she kisses. I don't like it when a straight man playing a gay scene says, 'I'm not a homosexual, I'm a heterosexual'. I didn't want it to seem like that. I told Gregoire, who plays Erwann, 'Let's make this completely fluid'.

I thought the sex scene between Ishmael and Erwann was quite beautiful.
There was a little bit of choreography for the scene though.

***The Dreamers* and *Ma Mere* were quite controversial films...**
For *The Dreamers* I didn't have to think about the audience at all because Bernardo (Bertolucci) is so intelligent and talented that he creates a set where you work as a team and for each other. For this film I was thinking a little bit about how I would be seen.

You're only 24. Did you ever consider that those two films, with their controversial subjects, could have hurt your career?
No. I don't think so. I didn't think about that.

Did you have any concerns when you said yes to *Ma Mere* about what your character was going to have to do? For instance, masturbating over your mother's dead body.
I was afraid because I didn't know Christophe very well and the script was difficult to understand because it was so technical, but once we were on set it was easier.



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So how would you describe what was happening between mother and son?
I don't have enough distance from the movie to say.

So you didn't think about what your character was doing?
No. Not really.

What about the reactions you got from the press?
I don't remember what they said.

You didn't read the reviews?
No I don't remember.

You have a reputation in the UK for always playing nude scenes...
I have a reputation? No.

Yes. Let's face it you're always taking your clothes off. Do you have any concerns before doing a nude scene?
I don't want to be naked anymore. I think my narcissistic period is over. [Laughs]

You've finished flaunting yourself then?
Yes.

"I don't like it when a straight man playing a gay scene says, 'I'm not a homosexual, I'm a heterosexual'. I didn't want it to seem like that (with me)."

So why's that?
It depends on my girlfriend.

Ah. How long have you been going out?
I don't know. The girls always know that.

Roughly. Five minutes? Five months?
I don't know. When I was at school the girls knew exactly the day of the first kiss, the first kiss with the tongue, the first hand on the arse, the first hand on the body... Why are girls so precise about these things? Strange, no?

Women are programmed to know such things and men aren't. Does your girlfriend get upset about your nude scenes then?
No, no. Not at all. [Laughs].

Are you going to keep all your clothes on in your new film with Christophe?
I think so. It's set in winter so I'll be wearing a big coat.

I read that you run around the set with no clothes on sometimes. Do you find being naked a liberating experience?
Have you ever been to a naturist beach?

No. I'm English. We don't do things like that.
They have them in England! [Looks confused] It's the same thing. You don't think at the time that the movie is going to be projected onto the big screen, you just do it for fun or for the work. It's afterwards that I realise someone I don't know has seen me in the nude. It's strange.

When you watch your performances are you critical?
When I first watched *The Dreamers* I felt I was the best one in the film. The second time I thought Michael Pitt was the best and the third time it was Eva Green.

You've starred in two films about the student riots of May 1968. Was that coincidence or do you feel passionately about that period?
The new French President hates 1968 and said that it isn't a good thing for France. During the presidential campaign I was really afraid because I played in two movies about it.

It's hard to know when you're being serious. You come from a family of actors and directors. Did you always want to be an actor?
I don't remember.

You don't like interviews much do you?
Yeah, yeah, yeah.

It's OK to say if you find them boring.
No. It's difficult because I don't know how to speak English well.

You must get asked the same questions all the time.
No. But sometimes I don't have the same answers for the same question. It's hard to find new things to say. I can say one thing to a journalist and the opposite to another. So it makes me a bit strange because then it's hard to know what I really think.

"When you're in love with somebody you have this feeling of responsibility towards them. You might have a narcissistic idea that without you the person is really nothing...but when you split up with somebody you see that they can be with someone else. It's hard."

Who would be your dream leading lady?
Cate Blanchett. She's brilliant. Diane Keaton, Marion Cotillard (*La Vie En Rose*), Julia Roberts.

Men?
I saw the last Woody Allen movie *Cassandra's Dream* (yet to be released here), which was brilliant. And the two actors [Ewan McGregor](#) and [Colin Farrell](#) were so good. I think [Joaquin Phoenix](#) and [Adrien Brody](#) are good.

Do you see yourself moving to Hollywood?
No. With this English?

You can get better. Gerard Depardieu did it.
He's a really good actor though.

You're not so bad yourself.
Sorry for being awkward.

It's alright. I'll let you off.

Find out more at www.louis-garrel.com and read our review of [Les Chansons d'Amour \(Love Songs\)](#). Look out for out interview with Christophe Honoré next week!

Les Chansons d'Amour (Love Songs) opens in the UK on 14 December 2007

Interested in queer films? Then get the DVD of [Le Clan](#) and [Ma Mere](#) online and save yourself some money to put towards the excellent [Latter Days](#), [Summer Storm](#), [À Toute Vitesse](#), [Presque Rien](#) and [Drole de Felix](#).

Author: Rachael Scott

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