

A Film Review by James Berardinelli

France, 1996

U.S. Release Date: beginning 11/27/96 (limited)

Running Length: 1:42

MPAA Classification: R (Nudity, mature themes)

Theatrical Aspect Ratio: 1.85:1

Cast: Charles Berling, Jean Rochefort, Fanny Ardant, Judith Godreche, Bernard Giraudeau, Bernard Dheran, Urbain Cancelier

Director: Patrice Leconte

Producer: Frederic Brillion, Philippe Carcassonne, Gilles Legrand

Screenplay: Remi Waterhouse

Cinematography: Thierry Arbogast

Music: Antoine Duhamel

U.S. Distributor: Miramax Films

In French with subtitles

In Patrice Leconte's (*The Hairdresser's Husband*) *Ridicule*, the pen -- or rather the word -- is truly mightier than the sword. In late 18th century France, before the advent of the guillotine, wit was used as often for pain and humiliation as it was for pleasure. Those who had mastered the art of ridicule could, with one turn of phrase, strip a less adept opponent of pride and position, hurling him from the pampered confines of Louis XVI's court into the hostile world beyond, where indignities and possibly death awaited.

Ridicule is not meant to be taken as a rigorous historical account, but, as with all French movies, the period detail is impeccable. The general atmosphere, if not the specifics, reflects 1783 Versailles, where a witty conversationalist was greatly prized as a source of entertainment, and where those with a gift for bon mots could attain a position of importance at the king's court (especially if their lineage connected them to a respected bloodline).

Gregoire Ponceludon de Malavoy (Charles Berling), a baron from the rural province of Dombes, comes to Versailles to obtain money for an ambitious engineering scheme that would drain southwest France's swamps to reduce disease and pestilence. Ponceludon entertains a hope that the king, known to be intrigued by science, might take an interest in the project and offer to fund it. However, what he discovers at Versailles disheartens him -- a corrupt rulership that prizes wit and pedigree over all other qualifications. Gaining an

audience with the king has more to do with one's ancestors, bedpartners, and verbal agility than with the merits of one's proposal.

Undeterred, Ponceludon finds a local sponsor, Bellegarde (Jean Rochefort), who sees promise in the idealistic newcomer and offers lessons of how to survive in Versailles ("Don't laugh with your mouth open", "We call puns the death of wit", "The soul of wit is to know one's place"). While the young nobleman is learning the rules of acceptable court behavior, he falls for Bellegarde's beautiful, young daughter, Mathilde (Judith Godreche). But, when Ponceludon's would-be romance with Mathilde flounders because of her impending marriage of convenience to a much older man, he seeks the sexual (and political) favors of Madame de Blayac (Fanny Ardant), a fixture at court who consorts with all the finest wits. Ponceludon then becomes involved in a series of contests with the appropriately-named Vilecourt (Bernard Giraudeau) to see whose wit is the most corrosive.

The humor in *Ridicule*, such as it is, is exceptionally savage. Leconte and screenwriter Remi Waterhouse have not designed this film to offer inconsequential laughs. As in *Dangerous Liaisons*, there's calculated malice behind each barbed riposte. But, while nearly every comic aspect of *Ridicule* is mean-spirited, it's difficult not to appreciate the intelligence behind the most vicious strikes.

Ridicule is not just the tale of a decaying, degraded empire of favoritism, although that is certainly an element of the plot. In addition, this film illustrates the power of language both to build and to tear down. It is also about choices. Ponceludon's own moral dilemma -- to retain his purity and reject court or to embrace the place by the king's side that his skill for ridicule can gain him -- is personified by the two women who want him: the sweet, independent Mathilde and the seductive, manipulative Madame de Blayac.

The cast is superlative, with Charles Berling (Nelly and M. Arnaud), Fanny Ardant (Colonel Chabert), and Jean Rochefort (*The Hairdresser's Husband*) turning in impressive performances. As *Ridicule*'s chief villain, Bernard Giraudeau (*Passion d'Amore*) savors all his nastiest lines, delivering them with relish. And, even though many aspects of Mathilde's character are anachronistic (she's a bit too modern to fit seamlessly into the time period), Judith Godreche is a beguiling asset.

Clocking in at about one-hundred minutes, Leconte's film is tightly-plotted and well-paced, with few wasted or unnecessary scenes. The script does have lapses, such as a sequence that uses a conventional duel to generate unnecessary tension and uncertainty, but, on the whole, the writing is *Ridicule*'s greatest asset. The carefully-rendered French-

to-English subtitles do justice to the sparkling dialogue, making the verbal matches between Ponceludon, Madame de Blayac, and Vilecourt one of Ridicule's highlights. For those who appreciate movies with a bite, Ridicule shows its teeth early and keeps them razor-sharp throughout.

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