



**FRANÇOIS TRUFFAUT: FOR THE LOVE OF FILMS**

# Day for Night (*La Nuit américaine*)

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

In the preface to his book *Les Films de ma vie* Truffaut wrote: 'When I was 20 I reproached André Bazin for considering films like mayonnaises that take or don't take... but I am sure we have all ended up adopting Bazin's mayonnaise theory because the practise of cinema has taught us a certain number of things: it demands as much effort to make a bad film as a good one; our most sincere film can look like a practical joke; the one we do most casually may end up going around the world; an idiotic but energetic film can be better cinema than an intelligent but flabby film; the result is rarely proportionate to the effort put into it.'

*La Nuit américaine* (1973) is not 'a bad film' but *Je vous présente Pamela*, the film within the film, has no pretensions to quality. It is clear that the effort involved in making it is disproportionate to its worth. Truffaut made the deliberate choice of containing *La Nuit américaine* within the shooting period of *Pamela*. The film opens on the set of a Parisian square. The camera follows a young man, played by Jean-Pierre Léaud, as he traverses the crowded square to the point where he slaps the face of an older man played by Jean-Pierre Aumont. A voice yells 'coupé' (cut) and immediately the crew are revealed, as preparations are made for a second take.

We learn that Aumont and Léaud are playing father and son in a melodrama in which the father runs off with the son's new wife. The mother, Séverine, played by Valentina Cortese, is an ageing Hollywood star of European origin with a drink problem, and the former lover of Aumont. Jacqueline Bisset plays the young wife and represents a Hollywood star of the current generation. She is recovering from a nervous breakdown and has married a doctor. The producer is only too aware that she is an insurance risk.

Léaud has got his girlfriend Liliane (Dani) a job as a trainee script-girl on the film, but is soon jealous of her flirtation with the stills man (Pierre Zucca). This *mélange* is overseen by Truffaut himself as the director, Ferrand, supported by his faithful script-girl, Joelle, played by Nathalie Baye in her first substantial screen appearance.

As the film unfolds we are made aware of the dramas behind the scenes both with the cast and with the crew. In the funniest scene in the film Cortese, the worse for drink, cannot remember her lines and is unable to exit through the door, consistently opening a cupboard instead. Not surprisingly, the director is having nightmares and soon feels that just getting to the end of the shoot will be an achievement. Several performers refuse to act: from a pregnant 'secretary' who has not agreed to be seen in a swimming costume, to a recalcitrant cat which refuses to lap milk on cue, to Léaud when deserted by his girlfriend, and Bisset who, having comforted Léaud, is betrayed by him to her husband.

It takes the death of the character played by Aumont in a car accident to rally the cast and crew for a final effort and the film is finished successfully. When

asked by a television crew at the end of the shoot how it has gone, the props man insists that everything has been wonderful.

After the release of *La Nuit américaine* Truffaut defended the film within the film, claiming a nostalgia for films that are not afraid to tell a story and that have no qualms about being melodramatic. Indeed he also said that if anything 'profound' is in the film he preferred to think it had got there in spite of him.

The most revealing of Truffaut's comments about cinematic mayonnaise is: 'An idiotic but energetic film can be better cinema than an intelligent but flabby film', because it shows his overriding concern for what he called 'dynamic' films. Of course he would have preferred to make intelligent films that were energetic, but it is interesting that he says 'better cinema' rather than more successful. This makes his definition of good cinema dependent on energy rather than intelligence.

With *La Nuit américaine* he need not have worried, but worry he did, as always. In a letter to Jean Hugo in April 1973 he wrote that he had just completed a particularly difficult film. Perhaps it was caution that made him decide to offer the film for the opening at Cannes rather than enter it in competition, but I prefer to believe it was an instinctive decision, made in the knowledge that such a celebration of cinema could not fail to please in that context.

That opening night in Cannes, 14 May 1973, was perhaps Truffaut's apotheosis. Anyone who has seen the footage of his triumphal ascendance of the staircase of the Grand Palais, arm in arm with four of his leading actresses, cannot fail to agree that Truffaut had finally brought together in public his two loves, cinema and women, in a public display worthy of a Middle Eastern potentate.

The triumph was to continue, reaching its zenith in Hollywood where Truffaut received the Oscar for Best Foreign Film. In his acceptance speech to the assembled masses of the cinema industry, he modestly said it was their award as the film was a celebration of cinema. But if they didn't mind, he added, he would look after it for them. Truffaut followed the film around the US, confident, once the New York Critics Circle had showered him with accolades (Best Picture, Best Director and Best Supporting Actress for Valentina Cortese), that the film was a success.

The story back home was, however, rather different; both publicly and privately. When released in Paris the critics were full of praise, forgetting the failure of Truffaut's two previous films: *Deux Anglaises et le Continent* (1971) and *Une belle fille comme moi* (1972). Although there were 300,000 admissions in Paris, the response in the provinces was only lukewarm.

Industry pundits felt that the man in the street imagined it to be either a documentary on the cinema or an overtly intellectual film. The idea of the film within the film was a conceit which, it was felt, would put many people off. The publicity had subsequently to drop all mention of 'story of a shoot'. Even the title was a problem and the preferred approach to publicity was summed up by 'A Franco-Hollywood night of love between Jean-Pierre Léaud and Jacqueline Bisset'.

**Extracted from *La Nuit américaine (Day for Night)* by Roger Crittenden (BFI Film Classics, 1998). Reproduced by kind permission of Bloomsbury Publishing. ©Roger Crittenden**

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## DAY FOR NIGHT (LA NUIT AMÉRICAINÉ)

*Director:* François Truffaut

©: Les Films du Carrosse

*A co-production:* Les Films du Carrosse, P.E.C.F. (Paris), P.I.C. (Rome)

*Unit Managers:* Roland Thénot, Alex Maineri

*Production Managers:* Marcel Berbert, Claude Miller

*Production Administrator:* Christian Lentretien

*Assistant Director:* Suzanne Schiffman

*2nd Assistant Director:* Jean-François Stévenin

*Script Girl:* Christine Pellé

*Original Screenplay:* François Truffaut,

Jean-Louis Richard, Suzanne Schiffman

*Director of Photography:* Pierre-William Glenn

*Camera Operator:* Walter Bal

*Assistant Camera:* Dominique Chapuis, Jean-François Gondre

*Editors:* Yann Dedet, Martine Barraque

*Art Director:* Damien Lanfranchi

*Costumes:* Monique Dury

*Make-up:* Fernande Hugé, Thi-Loan N'Guyen

*Hairdresser:* Malou Rossignol

*Titles:* CTR

*Laboratory:* GTC

*Colour by:* Eastmancolor

*Music:* Georges Delerue

*Sound Recording:* René Levert, Harrik Maury

*Sound Mixer:* Antoine Bonfanti

*Sound Studio:* Paris Studio Cinéma (Studios de Billancourt)

*Studio:* Les Studios de la Victorine (Nice)

*uncredited*

*Publicity:* Hunt Downs, Andy Pilgrim, Christine Brière

## Cast

Jacqueline Bisset (*Julie Baker, the star*)

Valentina Cortese (*Séverine*)

Dani (*Liliane, the script girl*)

Alexandra Stewart (*Stacey*)

Jean-Pierre Aumont (*Alexandre*)

Jean Champion (*Bertrand, the producer*)

Jean-Pierre Léaud (*Alphonse*)

François Truffaut (*Ferrand, the director*)

Nike Arrighi (*Odile, the costumer*)

Nathalie Baye (*Joelle, the assistant*)

Maurice Séveno (*TV reporter*)

David Markham (*Dr Michael Nelson*)

Bernard Menez (*Bernard, the prop man*)

Gaston Joly (*Lajoie*)

Zenaïde Rossi (*Mme Lajoie*)

Xavier Macary

Marc Boyle

Walter Bal (*W. William, the cameraman*)

Jean-François Stévenin

Pierre Zucca (*stills photographer*)

*uncredited*

Christophe Vesque (*boy in dream*)

Graham Greene (*Johanson, insurance representative*)

Marcel Berbert (*2nd insurance representative*)

Georges Delerue (*composer's voice on phone*)

Yann Dedet (*Yann, the editor*)

France/Italy 1973©

116 mins

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### The Last Metro (Le Dernier metro)

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Sat 22 Jan 20:30, Wed 26 Jan 20:30

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