



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

# The Last Metro

## (Le Dernier métro)

### A contemporary review

It is not surprising that *The Last Metro* has proved François Truffaut's most popular film to date both in France and the United States. It boasts two of France's most popular stars, Catherine Deneuve and Gerard Depardieu, the latter proving decisively with his performance in this film, after *Loulou* and *This Sweet Sickness* that he is the best leading player on the screen today. It has a host of comic or tragi-comic characters all acted with perfection. Above all it is the most purely thrilling film that Truffaut has yet directed and co-authored, the most tightly plotted and ingeniously made.

Set in the world of theatrical Paris of 1942, it tells the story of how Marion Steiner (Deneuve) is left to carry on as sole manageress and leading lady of the Theatre Montmartre, when her husband has had to flee the country because he is a Jew. Bernard (Depardieu) is a young actor from the Grand Guignol who joins the company as leading man in a racially impeccable play, written by a Norwegian and set at the turn of the century. It is called *Disappearance*. It would be wrong to reveal some of the surprises, but one can say that Lucas Steiner, Marion's husband, the 'genius' who used to run the theatre, is in fact hiding in its cellar and that Bernard is working for the Resistance.

Although I do not think it is Truffaut's greatest film it is, with *Day for Night* and *Jules et Jim*, his two other big hits, among his most enjoyable. Its 132 minutes flash by. Part of the ingenuity of its visual construction is rooted in the idea that the scenes off-stage, outside the theatre, have a greater theatricality than those inside the building. The little square where the theatre is situated is very clearly a set; the curtains that swish closed in the local cafe look exactly like tabs on a stage; the biggest melodramatic scene takes place in a Nazified night club. Just as the metaphors about filmmaking were so subtly woven into the texture of *Day for Night*, so in *The Last Metro* all the world is a stage.

As the story progresses and the first night of *Disappearance* approaches, we are given an increasing number of scenes from what looks and sounds, I'm afraid, a pretty bad play. The word 'lie' recurs frequently, and gradually the subtext and thus the full meaning of the film is revealed: it is about the difference between mendacity and artifice both in politics and in love. Everyone is role-playing. Most people honourably and one, the collaborator critic Daxiat (Jean-Louis Richard), despicably. Daxiat is the most unexpected character I remember in any of Truffaut's films – he is purely evil and is given no saving grace by a director who has never before allowed such moral disapproval to stain any of his creations. The actor who plays this monster of duplicity and cowardice is an unknown, and he does it very well: we are chilled by his pudgy sycophancy and outrageous hypocrisy.

More of a problem is Steiner himself, played by the handsome Heinz Bennent. It is notoriously difficult to portray a genius, and he has a good stab at the immured man tortured by frustration. But he is a parody Bohemian; with his long scarf and floppy hat he could have walked out of a Lautrec poster. One wishes that Truffaut, himself a genius and an interesting actor, had played the part, bringing to it his peculiar on-screen detachment which we have seen in *Day for Night*, *L'Enfant sauvage* and *Close Encounters*. His acting is fascinating in contrast to

his moral style as a director: one is dry, severe, almost absent in its unsentimental search for the romantic truth; the other, the director's, is in a perpetual ecstasy at the sweet oddnesses of life and its disappointments.

*The Last Metro* is so crammed with references, gestures and nods to other films that it would be tiresome to enumerate them. Truffaut cares about art in the way that most people care about themselves or those they are in love with. He celebrates good nature, stupidity, courage and – it must be said again – the capacity for attentive tenderness of which human beings are capable. This love of life and art spins and spans out; he almost threatens the audience with his delight at being part of the privilege of being alive.

No filmmaker has used literature with such passionate, open-hearted fastidiousness. In the very first scene where Bernard attempts to pick up a girl on the street we are both warned and delighted by what is to come. The surprises mount as the echoes of Balzac and Stendhal mingle with those of René Clair and Jean Renoir. The film is saturated with a Hitchcockian tension, but unmarked by the late director's sly misanthropy. Shot largely in close-up, with much use of panning and tracking shots, the style of the film further underlines the claustrophobia both of the war and the little tantrum-filled world of the theatre – again in complete contrast to *Day for Night*, with its swooning, looping crane shots looking in wonder at the chaos of a film set.

Deneuve has always been at her best directed by Truffaut. Where Buñuel, both in *Belle de jour* and *Tristana*, offered us an exquisite blank on which we might scribble our fantasies, Truffaut, in *La Sirène du Mississippi*, brought out a beautiful mysterious human being. In *The Last Metro* she has never been more glamorous: she can be tough, outraged, cold, loyal, stricken with doubt and desire, and achieves all these with conviction. As for Depardieu, his sexuality has little to do with his bruiser's body and broken nose, it lies rather in a hesitant, sometimes comic yearning combined with a determined and innocent courage. The irony of his chase after the theatre's wardrobe mistress involves one ravishingly funny moment when in his desperation he says he will tell her fortune by reading her palm – an excuse to touch her physically which she declines for deeper reasons than he then knows.

Hands play an important, understated, symbolic part in the film. The handshake, after all, is an image of trust as much as of greeting, and in the frightened, deceitful world of the Occupation there are special ironies in its abuse. There is a terrifying shot when Marion has to go to the Gestapo to plead that her theatre should not be shut down and she is shown into a room by a flattering Nazi officer and we realise, as the camera stares at his grip on her hand which he will not let go, that he wants to seduce, even rape her. Finally, in the very last shot, Marion stands centre stage and the camera pans from her holding her lover's hand in one and her husband's in the other: the triangle has, as it were, become a straight line. We are given a wonderfully Truffaut-esque image that no love or passion is wasted.

As ever in the abundant and electrifying world which Truffaut creates in his larger films it is tempting to describe the countless happy touches. One must suffice. There is a gentle running gag involving a little boy watering some plants in the tiny square of the theatre. Someone asks him how his flowers are faring. 'They're not flowers,' he snaps back, undistracted from his job. 'Ah, so you're a patriot – planting vegetables.' 'No,' says the boy, his concentration undeterred, 'you don't eat it – you smoke it.'

**Julian Jebb, *Sight & Sound*, Summer 1981**

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## THE LAST METRO (LE DERNIER MÉTRO)

*Director:* François Truffaut

©: Les Films du Carrosse S.A., T.F.1, Société Française de Production

*Production Companies:* Les Films du Carrosse, SEDIF S.A.,

T.F.1, Société Française de Production

*Production Manager:* Jean-José Richer

*Production Co-ordinator:* Roland Thénot

*Production Administrator:* Henry Dutrannoy

*Unit Manager:* Jean-Louis Godfroy

*1st Assistant Director:* Suzanne Schiffman

*2nd Assistant Director:* Emmanuel Clot

*Script Supervisor:* Christine Pellé

*Screenplay by:* François Truffaut, Suzanne Schiffman

*Dialogue by:* François Truffaut, Suzanne Schiffman,

Jean-Claude Grumberg

*Director of Photography:* Nestor Almendros

*Camera Assistants:* Florent Bazin, Emilio Pacull-Latorre, Tessa Racine

*Gaffer:* Jean-Claude Gasché

*Electricians:* André Seybald, Serge Valezy

*Key Grip:* Charles Freess

*Grips:* Jacques Fréjabue, Gérard Bougeant

*Stills Photography:* Jean-Pierre Fizet

*Editor:* Martine Barraqué-Curie

*Assistant Editors:* Marie-Aimée Debril, Jean-François Giré

*Art Director:* Jean-Pierre Kohut-Svelko

*Art Department Crew:* Pierre Gompertz, Jacques Leguillon,

Roland Jacob

*Properties:* Jacques Preisach

*Costumes:* Lisele Roos

*Costume Assistants:* Christiane Aumard-Fageol,

Edwige Chereil, Françoise Poillot

*Make-up:* Didier Lavergne

*Make-up Assistants:* Thi Loan N'Guyen, Françoise Ben Soussan

*Hairdresser:* Jean-Pierre Berroyer

*Assistant Hairdresser:* Nadine Leroy

*Titles and Opticals:* Euro-Titres

*Laboratory:* L.T.C. Saint-Cloud

*Film Stock:* Fujicolor, Pyral

*Music:* Georges Delerue

*Sound Recordist:* Michel Laurent

*Sound Assistant:* Michel Mellier

*Sound Mixer:* Jacques Maumont

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

*Sound Effects:* Daniel Couteau

*Studio:* Studios de Billancourt \*

## Cast

Catherine Deneuve (*Marion Steiner*)

Gérard Depardieu (*Bernard Granger*)

Jean Poiret (*Jean-Loup Cottins*)

Andréa Ferréol (*Arlette Guillaume*)

Paulette Dubost (*Germaine Fabre*)

Jean-Louis Richard (*Daxiat*)

Sabine Haudepin (*Nadine Marsac*)

Maurice Risch (*Raymond Bousier*)

Heinz Bennent (*Lucas Steiner*)

Christian Baltauss (*Bernard's replacement*)

Pierre Belot (*hotel desk clerk*)

René Dupré (*M. Valentin*)

Aude Loring

Alain Tasma (*Marc*)

Rose Thierry (*Jacquot's mother, concierge*)

Jacob Weizbluth (*Rosen*)

Jean-Pierre Klein (*Christian Leglisse*)

Rénata (*Greta Borg, cabaret singer*)

Marcel Berbert (*Merlin*)

Hénia Ziv (*Yvonne*)

László Szabó (*Lieutenant Bergen*)

Martine Simonet (*Martine Sénéchal*)

Jean-José Richer (*René Bernardini*)

Jessica Zucman (*Rosette*)

Richard Bohringer (*Gestapo officer*)

Franck Pasquier (*Jacquot-Eric*)

France 1979©

132 mins

\* Uncredited

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

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Programme notes and credits compiled by the BFI Documentation Unit

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