



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Léon Morin, prêtre

Between *Le Silence de la mer* and *Léon Morin, prêtre*, Melville's career had had its ups and downs. *Quand tu liras cette lettre...* had done well commercially but not critically, *Bob le flambeur* and *Deux hommes dans Manhattan* rather the opposite. *Deux hommes dans Manhattan* marked the low point in terms of box-office of all his films. After that, he 'had had enough of being an *auteur maudit* known only to a handful of crazy film-buffs'. His attempts at being a producer had not worked out, and as 'Georges de Beauregard and Carlo Ponti wanted me to make a film for them, I finally decided to adapt *Léon Morin, prêtre*'. With its big-shot producer, large budget and stars, and its popular success – more than 1.7 million people saw it in France, which made it Melville's biggest success so far – *Léon Morin, prêtre* was a turning point, marking Melville's move to mainstream filmmaking, a position he would occupy to the end of his career.

When *Léon Morin, prêtre* was released on 22 September 1961, the reputation of Béatrix Beck's Goncourt-winning novel, the film's stars and its potentially 'scabrous' topic all conspired to make it something of an event. A Catholic consultant, Father Lepoutre, was on hand to assist Melville with advice, and the then powerful Centrale Catholique duly gave it its seal of approval, as did the censorship commission. Melville's relationship with Beck was a lot easier than with Vercors. Although present at the rushes she did not take part in the adaptation and declared herself very happy with the film and its cast.

Léon Morin, prêtre narrowly missed being part of the French selection at Venice that year, but was shown out of competition and was awarded the Venice City prize. Given the film's subject matter, French critics predictably split in their reactions along ideological lines. The film was highly praised by the Catholic daily *La Croix* and the right-wing *Le Figaro* ('an honest, moving and beautiful film – like the novel which it reproduces so faithfully') and harshly criticised by left-wing papers like *L'Humanité* and *Combat* ('recalls Bresson, but more vulgar and more insistent'). The majority of critics however hailed the quality of Melville's filmmaking: as *Le Canard enchaîné*'s Michel Duran put it: 'It won't make me go to Mass, but I like this film.' Belmondo and Riva's performances received ecstatic praise.

The casting of two famous New Wave actors – Emmanuelle Riva and Jean-Paul Belmondo – as the protagonists of *Léon Morin, prêtre* stirred much interest in 1961 and contributed to the popular success of the film. While the relationship between Melville and the New Wave had already entered a difficult phase, Riva and Belmondo anchored *Léon Morin, prêtre* in the New Wave canon in the public perception at the time, despite its stylistic hybridity. Riva was (and would be forever) associated with her role as 'Elle' in *Hiroshima, mon amour*, in which she plays a French actress who goes to Hiroshima to act in a documentary about the bomb; her affair with a Japanese man helps her recall a traumatic relationship with a German soldier in Nevers during the war. Riva, together with Jeanne Moreau, embodied a new femininity: sexy in a 'realistic', less glamorous, and intellectual way (compared with sex symbols like Brigitte Bardot), related to the sensitivity and modernity of the New Wave films.

Melville was struck by Riva's talent and, apparently, resemblance to Beck. He used her screen persona to the full: her 'new woman' image as well as her dual association, born of *Hiroshima*, with war and sexual transgression. His extensive use of voiceover also showcased Riva's famous voice, a unique blend of cultured and halting elocution, lyrical yet fragile tones. The very first images of Riva with 1940s hairstyle and clothing riding a bicycle in *Léon Morin, prêtre* thus place her in the *Hiroshima* lineage. Later, when the two old ladies who looked after her daughter say jubilantly that they have come to watch the parade of women with their heads shaven, again *Hiroshima* comes to mind. Reviewer Jean Collet echoed many others when he said 'she seems never to have left Nevers'. Even some musical passages by Martial Solal evoke Giovanni Fusco's avant-garde score for Resnais' film.

Melville says he had waited for a suitable actor for Morin since the publication of the book in 1952. He found him in Jean-Paul Belmondo, the overnight sensation of *A bout de souffle*, who set a new pattern for modern French masculinity: cynical, athletic and nonchalant, unconventionally sexy. The success of *A bout de souffle* launched Belmondo on a prolific career (nine films in less than two years between *A bout de souffle* and *Léon Morin, prêtre*) and his currency was high in 1961. Melville's use of Belmondo is complex. A priest was, to say the least, against type compared to the thrillers and comedies Belmondo was used to; indeed he took some convincing before accepting the part. However, Melville was right, it is precisely the contrast between his *A bout de souffle* star persona and his identity as priest which creates Morin's sexual and emotional charge. A survey conducted by the Catholic publication *Les Amis du film* indicated that Morin had been dubbed a 'New Wave priest – a priest with a direct, honest and virile attitude, a kind of comrade.'

Together, Riva and Belmondo lent modernity, sex-appeal and 'New Waveness' to a story that would otherwise have appeared dusty and old-fashioned, with its theological discussions set in a drab small town. Even the distinguished Catholic novelist François Mauriac was moved to comment on the quality of Belmondo and Riva's performances in *Le Figaro littéraire*.

Ginette Vincendeau, *Jean-Pierre Melville 'An American in Paris'* (BFI, 2003)

LÉON MORIN, PRÊTRE (LÉON MORIN, PRIEST)

Director: Jean-Pierre Melville

Production Companies: Rome-Paris Films (Paris),

Compagnia Cinematografica Champion

Producer: Georges de Beauregard

Production Managers: Marcel Georges, Edith Tertza, Bruna Drigo

Assistant Directors: Volker Schlöndorff, Jacqueline Parey, Luc Andrieux

Screenplay: Jean-Pierre Melville

Based on the novel by: Béatrix Beck

Director of Photography: Henri Decaë

Camera Operators: Jean Rabier, Jean-Paul Schwartz, Claude Amiot

Stills Photography: Raymond Gauchetier

Editors: Jacqueline Meppiel, Nadine Marquand, Marie-Josèphe Yoyotte

Art Directors: Daniel Guéret, Donald Cardwell

Set Decorator: Robert Christidès

Properties: Jean Brunet, Robert Testand

Dresser: Paulette Breil

Make-up: Christine Fornelli

Titles: Jean Fouchet

Music: Martial Solal

Harmonica: Albert Raisner

Sound: Guy Villette, Jacques Maumont,

Robert Cambourakis, Jean Gaudalet

Cast

Jean-Paul Belmondo (*Léon Morin*)

Emmanuelle Riva (*Barny*)

Irène Tunc (*Christine*)

Nicole Mirel (*Sabine*)

Marielle Gozzi (*France*)

Patricia Gozzi (*France, when older*)

Gisèle Grimm (*Lucienne*)

Marco Béhar (*Edelman*)

Monique Bertho (*Marion*)

Marc Heyraud

Nina Grégoire

Monique Hennessy (*Arlette*)

Edith Loria (*Danielle*)

Micheline Schererrer

Renée Liques

Simone Vannier, Lucienne Marchand, Nelly Pitorre (*secretaries*)

Ernest Varial (*director*)

Chantal Gozzi

Cedric Grant, George Lambert (*Gls*)

Gérard Buhr (*German soldier*)

Howard Vernon (*German colonel*)

Madeleine Ganne (*Betty*)*

Adeline Aucoc (*old lady in church*)*

Saint-Eve (*priest*)*

Volker Schlöndorff (*German sentry*)*

France/Italy 1961

117 mins

* Uncredited

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**Léon Morin, prêtre (Léon Morin, Priest)**

Mon 28 Mar 17:50; Thu 7 Apr 20:40; Sun 24 Apr 12:00

Lourdes

Tue 29 Mar 20:50; Thu 7 Apr 18:10; Wed 20 Apr 20:50

Ordet (The Word)

Wed 30 Mar 17:45 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large);

Sun 10 Apr 15:30; Fri 15 Apr 18:10; Sat 23 Apr 11:50

Black Narcissus

Thu 31 Mar 21:00; Tue 12 Apr 20:45; Tue 19 Apr 18:10; Sat 30 Apr 15:00

Babette's Feast (Babettes Gaestebud)

Fri 1 Apr 18:10; Sun 10 Apr 12:10; Sat 16 Apr 12:20; Tue 26 Apr 20:50

Aguirre, Wrath of God (Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes)

Sat 2 Apr 20:40; Fri 8 Apr 18:15; Tue 19 Apr 20:50; Mon 25 Apr 18:10

The Seventh Seal (Det Sjunde Inseplet)

Sun 3 Apr 15:20; Mon 18 Apr 15:20; Fri 22 Apr 20:50

The Miracle Woman

Mon 4 Apr 18:20; Fri 15 Apr 20:50; Thu 28 Apr 18:10; Fri 29 Apr 18:10

Stalker

Tue 5 Apr 20:00; Sat 9 Apr 17:30; Thu 21 Apr 20:00; Sat 23 Apr 20:00

My Night with Maud (Ma Nuit chez Maud)

Wed 6 Apr 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large);

Thu 14 Apr 20:30; Fri 22 Apr 17:50; Mon 25 Apr 20:45

Une Femme douce (A Gentle Creature)

Wed 6 Apr 21:00; Wed 13 Apr 18:20 (+ intro by independent filmmaker and critic Alex Barrett); Mon 18 Apr 13:10

The New World

Sun 10 Apr 17:30; Sat 30 Apr 19:50

The Gospel According to Matthew (Il vangelo secondo Matteo)

Mon 11 Apr 18:00; Sun 17 Apr 14:40

The Last Temptation of Christ

Fri 15 Apr 14:15; Sun 24 Apr 17:40

Sebastiane

Sat 16 Apr 14:50; Tue 19 Apr 20:30; Wed 27 Apr 17:45 (+ intro by BFI curator Simon McCallum)

I Confess

Sun 17 Apr 12:00; Wed 20 Apr 18:00 (+ intro tbc)

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