

Gérard Depardieu has at last returned to his true form in THE SINGER, which was a huge hit in France. Xavier Giannoli has created a genuinely touching love story which displays humour and a sense of compassion for its characters.

Gérard Depardieu plays the part of Alain Moreau, a nightclub crooner in Clermont-Ferrand - described by one critic as: 'much lower in the food chain than Charles Aznavour, but cut from the same cloth.'

One night, Alain sees young, beautiful blonde, Marion (Cécile de France) in the audience and decides to engineer a meeting through one of his friends, Estate Agent, Bruno (Mathieu Amalric).

Estate Agent Marion a single mother with an unhappy story, is cautious and untrusting, but before too long, a tentative relationship begins to develop. However, Bruno soon becomes a rival for Marion's affections

The on-screen chemistry between Dépardieu and de France is remarkable and the film is further enhanced by emotionally fluid performances by all the actors and and some clever plot twists. Whilst Alexandre Desplat's excellent score gives an added depth to the proceedings.

“ For this film, one of the trickiest things was to avoid descending into caricature, so I did some research, and wound up meeting Alain Chanone, a dance hall singer in Clermont-Ferrand. With Chanone and his band, I discovered a world with its rituals, settings, sounds and public. I followed his band (which became Gérard's band in the film), on the road, lived for a while in Chanone's farmhouse (which became Gérard's home in the film) and everything fell into place quite naturally.

“I had Depardieu in mind when I was writing the screenplay – he's the actor I wanted to film ever since I was very young. He was my David Bowie or Mick Jagger. Even if it sounds naïve, I never had any doubt that I would work with him. He understood that the character required restraint. He understands everthing, anyway.... I wanted people to discover a new facet of his acting genius. He was wonderful on set, both committed and inventive – and he can sing!”

Xavier Giannoli

**THE SINGER
(QUAND J'ÉTAIS UN CHANTEUR)**

Director: XAVIER GIANNOLI
Screenplay: XAVIER GIANNOLI
Director of
photography: YORICK LE SAUX
Sound: FRANCOIS MUSY/ GABRIEL HAFNER
Costumes: NATALIE BENROS
Set Designer: FRANCOIS-RENAUD LABARTHE
Original score ALEXANDRE DESPLAT
Producers: EDOUARD WEIL et PIERRE-ANGE LE
PROGAM

EUROPACORP, RECTANGLE PRODUCTIONS, FRANCE 3 CINEMA //PRODUCTIONS

Alain Moreau GERARD DEPARDIEU
Marion CECILE DE FRANCE
Bruno MATHIEU AMALRIC
Michèle CHRISTINE CITTI
Daniel PATRICK PINEAU
Philippe Mariani ALAIN CHANONE

- An Artificial Eye Release -

**THE SINGER
(QUAND J'ÉTAIS UN CHANTEUR)**

SYNOPSIS

Present day. A dance hall singer meets a young woman...

THE SINGER (QUAND J'ÉTAIS UN CHANTEUR)

INTERVIEW WITH XAVIER GIANNOLI

Where did you get the idea for "The Singer"?

If I could articulate it, I don't think I would film it. In this instance, it was music, songs. What happens when I listen to a song, why it touches me, why it's important – that moment. I think that everybody has felt that. It's pretty universal. Some songs sweep me off my feet, in the same way some films do. Some tracks become worlds of their own. Record producer, Phil Spector used to make "pocket symphonies". I really like that expression. I like the poetry of what are known as chansons à texte, of course, but even more so that of pop songs, which is more quirky. Although we'd have to define our terms about what "pop" really is. Just like a child, cinema started to talk in song with *The Jazz Singer*, which is significant. Singing is part of human nature and also of the nature of cinema.

Did something in particular trigger the film?

If you want to go into influences, I recall my father, standing in the kitchen, singing opera and Corsican folksongs. My father sang the whole time, from morning to night. There is also Christophe, who wrote "*Les Paradis Perdus*" and whom I've known since childhood. So, the film is shot through with all that in an oblique way.

So, the initial idea was of a singer...

It's not a story about a singer but about a man who is a singer and his encounter with a young woman. At this stage in my life, the inspiration for writing came to me in the form of this character who would rather people feel affection and respect for him than admiration. That is what makes him impertinent. The notion of dignity soon imposed itself as a theme that more or less stood out while we were making the film. Dignity in love, in his work, in short, in his life... But anyway, it's just a note, a chord...

With words that are often very simple and the mystery of a melody, a mood, the songs evoke profound and complex existential problems. It's easy to understand and impossible to explain. To me, that's what cinema is all about...

So the songs are intimately linked to the story of the film. They are the inner voice. It was when I was listening to a song, "*Quand J'étais Chanteur*" (Michel Delpech) that the idea of a dance hall singer came into my mind.

As is my habit ever since my first short films, I talked it over with my friend Yves Stavriles. I have often consulted him, and he has always helped me to find the tone, distance, or detail that enable me to move forward.

So, you brought together these elements in the writing of your screenplay?

It's more complex than that. In the dance hall, when the singer is working his magic, it became a question of making all these colors dance: the white jacket, the child in him, the dignity, and derision. Moreover, it was logical to see the film like a mirror-ball. That's when I came up with the line that Gérard says at the beginning of the film: "I'm sure that by studying the dancers' movements, you'd understand a lot more about people and the world." Luckily, it makes him smile to play the philosopher.

Were you familiar with the world of the dance hall?

Not really. Vague recollections from family vacations – nothing very exciting. I guess I was a bit like Jacques Brel when he sings, "I can't take any more oompah bands, waltzing and accordion." In sum, I had lots of snobbish preconceptions. But, at the same time, I was drawn to these people who make their living out of songs. What world do they live in? Could I make a film in that world now, today?

Wasn't the trickiest thing to avoid descending into caricature?

That's why I rejected the picturesque, mockery or smug indulgence. So, I did some research, a little documentary, and wound up meeting Alain Chanone, a dance hall singer in Clermont-Ferrand. He sings in dance halls, at office parties and tea dances. He was a worker at the Michelin plant and now he likes to say that he's "world famous in Clermont-Ferrand". So he's able to make fun of himself, but above all, he's sincere and honest. The cliché of bitterness was swept away immediately. Alain probably has some hidden pain – you can hear it in his voice. A fine

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voice, no more, no less. So, as a teenager might say, "He doesn't think he's what he's not". I'm thinking of a reporter who came on the shoot and described Chanone, in a newspaper article, as a "second-rate singer". Classy, huh?! He was deeply hurt and asked me, "Why don't they just put dance hall singer? I've never claimed to be anything other than that..." That cynicism and clumsiness were exactly what I wanted to avoid in the film.

Your meeting with him was crucial then...

With Chanone and his band, I discovered a world with its rituals, settings, sounds and public. I saw that we were miles from the 'oompah bands' Jacques Brel sang about. The places they perform at and the people they perform to are quite classy. They have a certain style. Some people come just to dance, and others come in the hope of meeting that special someone. As Chanone told me, "When you're 40, you don't go to a nightclub to dance to techno music with a bunch of kids. So I give single people something to dance to. I give them a little happiness." I followed his band (which became Gérard's band in the film) on the road, lived for a while in Chanone's farmhouse (which became Gérard's home in the film) and everything fell into place quite naturally.

Who chooses the songs for this kind of dance?

A dance hall singer is obliged to do all the classics and best-known tunes – to get the show on the road, to "capture" the audience. Later in the evening, he can risk singing less well-known material, but people come to dance, not to listen to the singer. Chanone won't go near anything by Barbara, Jacques Brel, or Gérard Manset, for example. Firstly, because they intimidate him and then because it's difficult to dance to Les Marquises. He won't do any of his own material either, just covers. That's where nostalgia reared its head – it's a recurrent problem for me. It's a theme that's too soppy, too overworked. I was after something more offbeat. So I pictured my singer in a kimono with a UV tanning lamp, Bobby Solo on his jukebox, and his widescreen TV showing a video of a typically lousy R'n'B band with the sound turned down. He's not nostalgic for something, he's in another world.

Did you follow very closely what you had seen in Clermont-Ferrand?

I shot the film down there, in the real settings with the real characters, such as Chanone who plays Mariani, Alain Moreau's rival. The whole dance hall universe literally captivated me. I took photos and filmed a pretty modern and sophisticated world, not at all the cliché of the old-style dance hall. I felt at home with them...

I showed Chanone my two previous films, *Eager Bodies* and *Only The Night*. With disarming forthrightness, he pointed out that we have a similar repertoire: feelings. The film was never destined to be a documentary feature on the dance hall world but a love story, hopefully, devoid of sentimentalism. The story of an unexpected, unsettling encounter between two human beings, portrayed with the simplicity of a song. At the time, like Marion, I needed to meet a larger-than-life character like Alain Moreau. It did me a lot of good, thinking him up.

Tell us about the meeting between Alain and Marion...

I'd prefer to sing it but, you know, I can't sing. In one of Christophe's recent singles, there's a line I like a lot, "The most beautiful things deep down are always just bubbling under". Actually, I don't feel very comfortable talking about the psychology of the characters. When I write, I take no theoretical stand on my characters. I look for events, actions, "moments" that would embody on screen what words cannot say. I start out from what's factual, what's solid: it's better to show than to say. Alain Moreau lives immersed in the lights of the dance halls, music and encounters. He's a lonely man who sings about love but doesn't live it anymore, or does so badly. Marion is young, beautiful, and demanding. She is a real estate agent. She shows him around silent, empty houses. This "contract" between them serves as a pretext. And it is a bit like a dance – all about distance, brief touches, looks, and a dash of humor. Whereas Alain has plenty of things to say, she has plenty she wants to keep quiet, and he has a kind of natural elegance that means he respects that. What also brings them together is a certain approach to love – not lowering your standards, refusing cowardice; the deep-rooted instinct that feelings of love are somehow vital and insuperable, but also, necessarily, incomplete. Something important in which all of life can be gauged: desire and solitude. They are a shot in the arm for each other, and it makes their lives fuller, more dense, musical, and sensual. It reminds me of the way they wax the dance floor to make the dancers' feet glide more easily, and of the fragile, unlikely cloud that fleetingly hovers in the lights of the dance hall. It's very real yet intangible, though I try to capture it...

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So Marion is at the center of this story?

Without her, there wouldn't be a film. She is what sets the film apart from a simple story. She sets the tone, leads the dance. Cécile de France was the obvious choice because, for me, she's magical. Truly, the woman is magical. I had mostly seen her play very young women in comedies – never the role of a woman who could have a demanding, tumultuous relationship to life. Usually, she's younger than she really is, but I sensed there was something under the surface. There was something to be conquered, a shadow. She brought a sheen and un hoped-for freshness to Marion's solitude. On top of that, she has this amazing figure, without any vulgarity – the face of a star and the humor and juvenile ardor that send a charge flowing through her scenes with fifty-year-old Alain Moreau. Gérard, Mathieu, and myself were very lucky to have this experience with her. She's a rare talent. She's a sign of life, both serious and funny, capable of bringing to life, without any pathos, the other person's expectations. She brings to mind a song by Charles Trenet that I sometimes talked about with Gérard, La Folle Complainte, in which he mentions "the storm's revenge". For me, Cécile is "the storm's revenge"... whatever that means.

Did you have Gérard Depardieu in mind when you were writing the screenplay?

Yes. He's the actor I've wanted to film ever since I was very young. He was my David Bowie or Mick Jagger. Even if it sounds naïve, I never had any doubt that I would work with him. I sent him the script. He read it and said yes. Simple. He knew that I wasn't looking for a superstar but an actor, period. That's the only way to respect him. He understood that the character required restraint. He understands everything, anyway...

I don't want to give people the Depardieu they're used to, as has been claimed – I want them to discover a new facet of his acting genius. He was wonderful on set, both committed and inventive. He sensed that Cécile, Mathieu, and I expected everything from him, that we would sink our teeth into him. I don't know...

Something happened. He understood that this moment with him was important in our lives. I hope that comes out on screen. I couldn't stop laughing when he said to me between takes, "Oh no! No psychology!" Like Clint Eastwood, he could say, "I just do it, that's all." In fact, it is Depardieu who has built a body of work through various directors, not the opposite. For me, Gérard brought modern cinema into the world, and I wanted him to help me benefit from his independence to express things I felt dearly about, in my own way. The whole issue of the star playing an unknown and so forth is, to my mind, completely anecdotal and not very interesting. It's not what I was working toward.

And he can sing!

There was never any question of dubbing him. I didn't want him to sing like Pavarotti, just have a good, professional singing voice. That's part of the subject of the film. We went into the studio and tried a list of songs that were in his vocal range. Some songs were obvious choices. When he sings Save The Last Dance For Me by Mort Shuman or L'Anamour by Serge Gainsbourg, he inhabits the song, occupies its space. There was something that was just-so about it, a kind of skintight fit. But I don't want to overplay that – it would be missing the point. I asked him to sing like a dance hall singer, not to put on a show. And he looked so good, with his blond highlights and that unique voice of his. I also think that he was a little bit nervous. He could sense that we were there to listen to him, not to indulge him.

You already knew Mathieu Amalric well...

I worked with him on my short film, The Interview. When I had the idea for the film, he was there right away, in the skin of the third character, Bruno. He is by far the best actor of his generation. Something sparkles in him – something that's very physical and quite close to Gérard in terms of inventiveness of movement, action and freedom in his performance. And it was particularly interesting to have him tussling over a woman with Depardieu. They are not of the same generation, they have radically different physiques, and Mathieu has the brilliance that is necessary to unsettle Gérard. There is a particular balance there, as with Christine Citti and Patrick Pineau.

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Did this story require a particular approach in your way of directing?

What's the point in ambitious camera movements to film a man who's wary of ambition? You have to look for something else. But, once more, it wasn't thought out. For me, making a film is about capturing the moment, the action that unites space, light, actors, the mood on set and, of course, what I wrote. If I had to put it in a few words, I'd say that I strive for simplicity, precision and, above all, liberty. No system, no formula, just care, in every sense of the word. I'm not very directive – I prefer to oversee. Strangely enough, I've noticed that it is often the way two people look at each other that starts the ball rolling and helps me to find the scene's, and even the film's, angle. Depardieu often asked me a pertinent question: "Is it alive?" It's not about filming life, it's about bringing the film to life. Harsh naturalism doesn't interest me. A film that is personal is, by definition, stylized.

How was the film produced?

"The Singer" is a co-production between Edouard Weil at Rectangle (the company with which I made my first two features) and Pierre-Ange Le Pogam at EuropaCorp (which is also handling the distribution). Everything went smoothly, with mutual respect and a permanent concern for what was best for my film. I would like to thank them for that.

What does being selected in the official competition at the Cannes Festival mean to you?

It makes me feel very humble and, of course, very grateful to festival director, Thierry Frémaux. It's the biggest festival in the world, the biggest cultural event. It's only natural to be nervous, but it's a feeling I like when I imagine the silhouettes of my actors and crew, of Chanone and Christophe against the background of a red carpet. Fortunately, we'll all be dressed up as if we're going to a tea dance, so I won't be totally lost.

How did you translate the songs into English?

You don't sing the subtitles – you read them. So, the rhymes, the number of feet, and so on, aren't a problem. A translation is by definition an interpretation. The real problem is the song, L'Anamour which is untranslatable. Any idea?

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INTERVIEW WITH GERARD DEPARDIEU

How did Xavier Giannoli describe this role to you?

It was a surprise to meet somebody in this business who had a clear vision, sharp mind, knew what he was talking about and was endowed with boundless love for cinema and song. Xavier has a fine knowledge of movies. What I mean by that is that he is eclectic, open to all kinds of genres, with, generally, a critical and polemical mind that I appreciate. So, he's a young man of temperament with a character that appears very difficult but is actually just a consequence of his perfectionism. What he does is like nothing other than himself. That's why, when he sent me the script of *The Singer*, I said yes right away. There is no message to get across other than the energy of a young, independent director who has a story to tell. Everything else is incidental.

What was your initial impression of the story?

That it was very beautiful and written by someone who knew what he was talking about. The authenticity of the dialogue reminded me of the films that I love. It is stamped with a very poetic respect for dance hall singers in Clermont-Ferrand or anywhere else. I didn't see in it the condescending, metropolitan attitude that a lot of pretentious young directors would have shown. Then I saw Xavier leading a crew that he seemed to be used to working with, demanding the highest standards of everybody without being overbearing.

What kind of high standards?

Talented directors are often preceded by a fearful reputation. So, Giannoli was reputed to be harsh and uncompromising... Xavier isn't harsh. He's very fair. He is both difficult and charming because he is full of intelligence and hugely sensitive. He's likable and, above all, discreet, with a strong personality and an obsessive side, which means he never short-changes his script because it's sufficiently well thought through that it doesn't need to be rethought. He has developed his own method of production and so remains very independent in his work. He has a good sense of humor, too we often laughed over the same things.

Were you apprehensive about playing a singer?

Alain Moreau is a man who likes tunes and songs and who simply makes people dance. In this instance, it wasn't any tougher to perform Gainsbourg's songs than Christophe's or anybody else's. The whole point wasn't to mimic them but to play Alain Moreau performing them in his own way. Thank goodness because it's harder to be Michel Delpech than Alain Moreau singing Michel Delpech's songs. Real chansons are poems. In François Truffaut's *The Woman Next Door*, Mathilde says, "Songs tell the truth." Appreciating their true value requires great sensitivity. Which Alain Moreau possesses.

Did you meet Alain Chanone, Xavier's reference for Alain Moreau?

Of course. And I've known others like him. He's a guy whose passion drives him. A good guy. It felt good, having him around, as well as all the other real-life characters from the dance hall world.

Did you and Xavier talk over the songs you would perform in the film?

Yes, mind you, I knew them all well. Barbara always used to tell me that singing a chanson is a unique art. A singer on tour sets out on an exhilarating adventure. Sometimes it can be hard coming back down to earth. Alain Moreau is more interesting than that. He knows that world, but he prefers his small world of people who come to dance to him. He knows that he can never be a star. Does he actually want to be one? Isn't that what makes him so different, so human? He lives with his goat, his sun lamp, and his melancholy. The only thing that can upset his solitude is love. You sense that he had someone, but it's something that is constantly on the verge of ending. The proof comes with his interludes with his ex-wife, played by Christine Citti. With Marion, it's different. She belongs to another generation. She escapes him. She's more lucid, peremptory, abrupt... The total opposite of Cécile de France! She's so sweet, open, and sensitive! A wonderful woman. She is delightfully free. Upbeat and incredibly aware. Maybe it has something to do with being Belgian? I wish her a lot of happiness.

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One gets the sense that you laid yourself open in this film as you haven't done for a long time?

In a different way, sure. There are people who get scared and others who make use of what you bring to the table. I'm not impressive. Only idiots are impressed. When people are themselves, there's no worry. Parisians have no sense of reality, authenticity or mystery anymore. At no point does Giannoli judge the characters he is filming. He loves them in the same way Jean Renoir would have loved them. You come out of this film bigger, raised up. First of all, it's enjoyable, partly because of the songs whose significance isn't immediately obvious. And then for the identity that is inherent to auteur movies, in which the viewpoint ennobles the audience. After all, this is the story of a man who wants to make people happy. There's nothing greater. I was equally moved when I first saw it as when I first read it. Especially by the intelligence of the directing and the unobtrusive rigor in the dramatic structure. Purely technical performances depend on their coherence with the situation. When it's strong, there is no need for any effects.

It's almost as if the line, "Each time everyone thinks I'm done for, I bounce back" was written for you...

We're always the first to think that. It's a simple and very strong line. In any case, the guy who believes he has talent is dead. He doesn't survive thanks to other people, but through the motivation that he puts into his work. Our personal talent only becomes visible when it escapes us. It's the same with a director: if there's no love in what he's attempting to achieve, it has no hope. Nobody can give grace without love.

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INTERVIEW WITH CECILE DE FRANCE

How did Xavier Giannoli describe Marion to you?

Life has made her fragile. She left her husband and doesn't see her son very often. As if she were looking for herself. And when you go looking for yourself, you inevitably meet people. That's how she encounters Alain Moreau, who seems to come from another planet. She senses a certain emotion in him, a breath of fresh air and an originality that she craves. I think Marion is touched by Alain's tact and discretion. Moreover, that's how it needed to be played: restrained, nuanced, not saying things, with tacit understanding. From the very first takes, Xavier reined in my movements. I had to keep it simple and let what he was looking for filter out.

It's a love story...

An unusual one, yes... They help each other and transform each other. After their relationship, which happens too early, or too late perhaps, nothing can be the same again. It's a special moment in their lives that they'll never forget. They know it won't last and they're not thinking pragmatically about it. They're in turmoil...

Xavier didn't make Marion a real estate agent by chance...

Of course not. It allows her and Alain Moreau, who is looking for a new house, to meet in empty homes, neutral backdrops, in which, partly for professional reasons and partly out of curiosity, she tries to find out more about him. If he has children, if he lives alone, if he used to be married... You sense that Marion evolves over the course of the visits. In fact, very soon, we don't see the outside of the houses anymore. That's no longer what is important. Inside there are empty spaces, but hearts to be filled. He is elegant in that he doesn't take himself seriously. Nothing is more seductive for a woman than truthfulness.

And the songs...

What I really like is the poetic way Xavier deals with the world of popular music, which is totally alien territory for my character. The art of a chanson is to deal with very complicated things in simple terms. How can you explain why a particular tune sends a shiver down your spine or makes you want to dance? These are things you can't rationalize. You just act on instinct. It's no coincidence that Xavier is fascinated by that particular universe because that's how he is – instinctive.

Were you a fan of this kind of music before the shoot?

Not particularly. I listened to Gainsbourg, of course, but Christophe, Michel Delpech... No! I guess that makes me pretty similar to Marion. Just like her, I evolved during the shoot. I fell for Les Paradis Perdus the first time I heard it. In fact, you have to take the time to listen to the songs, to let them wash over you. L'Anamour, for example, comes very early in the film. We took our time shooting the scene, which comes at a turning point in their lives. When he sings and she dances, what happens between them is crucial. That's where she enters his world and allows herself to be seduced by what he is. She transcends her prejudices to move onto something else. And it's precisely because nothing is possible that it all happens. Just like in real life...

Did you approach your role in a special way, because the male lead was played by Gérard Depardieu?

In the same way that Marion lets herself go with Alain, I let myself go with Gérard. He took me by the hand and led me along. He could have done his "Gérard and his big band" number but no! I enjoyed it so much, I got a real buzz out of it! We didn't rehearse, we just took the plunge from the first take, without rehearsals or anything. Xavier was looking for those rare moments when actor, character, fiction, and reality come together. Moments of grace...

You met Gérard before the shoot though?

No, in fact. The first time we met was shooting the first scene when Marion and Alain meet at the casino. I was a little apprehensive but I had a good feeling about it. After talking to Xavier, we knew that this shoot would be experimental. Gérard couldn't have been more committed to his work. From the very first take, it was magical. I said to myself that if things carried on like that, it would be an amazing experience. And it was.

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When Alain first meets Marion, there's a hint that she is in some kind of a relationship with Bruno, played by Mathieu Amalric...

Marion and Bruno's relationship is one of seduction and eroticism. Mathieu is impressive. I watched him at least as much as Gérard. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that I learned a lot about my trade on this film.

It's the first time we see you play someone who has moments of despair...

I was thrilled that an auteur like Xavier trusted me to play this kind of part. But it's not because Marion crumbles occasionally when she's alone in her room that she should be desperate or resigned. I had to maintain a combative aspect, even when she's totally lost. Xavier probably chose me partly for that as well: my directness, the Belgian side to me – in a word, my 'foreignness'. And then there's her look, which is a vital part of her. Marion wears a lot of red, bright colors, the fire burning inside volcanoes. OK, you have to be an actor to tell yourself stuff like that, but I have rarely seen such meticulousness in visual terms. And I'm very proud to be in a fine-looking film with such sincere poetry in both sound and picture.

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Xavier Giannoli - Filmography

The Interview - 1998
Palme d'Or, Best Short Film

Eager Bodies – 2003

Only the Night – 2005