

1999 Sydney Film Festival

A work of authenticity, artistic substance and optimism

By Richard Phillips
10 July 1999

One of the highlights of the Sydney Film Festival for this writer was the screening of Bertrand Tavernier's *It All Starts Today*. Reviewed at the Berlin Film Festival by the *World Socialist Web Site* earlier this year (see link below), *It All Starts Today* is a remarkable film by any measure.

Without repeating the comments made in the previous review, I found that Tavernier's film transforms his genuine and deeply felt concerns about the situation confronting working people today—in this case teachers and social workers in Hernaing in northern France—into a work of great authenticity, artistic substance and optimism.

The film's main protagonist is Daniel Lefebvre (brilliantly portrayed by Philippe Torreton) the teacher and principal of a pre-school in a mining town in northern France. Unemployment is 30 percent and the town devastated by the closure of the coal mines. Its inhabitants are attempting to survive and raise their families under the most difficult conditions. The movie tells the story of Lefebvre and his fellow teachers and how they attempt to deal with the social impact of this poverty on the local children and the community.

After a tragic incident at the pre-school, Lefebvre decides to wage a single-handed campaign against the local government, including the Communist Party mayor, over power cut-offs to poverty-stricken tenants and the lack of social workers, health care employees and facilities in the area. A sensitive yet determined man, Lefebvre confronts a wall of bureaucratic opposition but rallies the parents and eventually some of the social workers behind him. However, even as he wages this fight Lefebvre's own life is in turmoil. He has difficulty communicating with his girlfriend's son;

his father, a retired miner, is dying from emphysema; and the education department authorities are working behind the scenes to pull Lefebvre back into line.

There are, of course, no happy endings in this portrait of a man and a community attempting to overcome a myriad of social problems. But by honestly, accurately and with acute sensitivity dramatising this reality, Tavernier provides hope to all those determined to transform the situation that they confront. The film, which radiates with the warmth and affection Tavernier and all his actors feel for its characters, is a real antidote to the never-ending media and government claims that poverty is the fault and responsibility of the individuals affected.

To produce a poetic and emotionally engaging film about these issues without preaching, moral posturing or making any concessions to the powers-that-be, is a difficult task. At this stage few aspire to this challenge. Tavernier's determination to produce such a film is an act of courage, humanity and a testimony to his considerable artistic skills.

Born in Lyon, France in 1941, Bertrand Tavernier began his distinguished career in the film industry as critic for movie journals, *Positif* and *Cahier du Cinema*. After a short period as an assistant director with Jean-Pierre Melville, Tavernier became a press agent working with a wide range of filmmakers—from the Hollywood greats through to Joseph Losey, Stanley Kubrick and many European directors. Since the acclaimed *The Clockmaker*, his first feature in 1973, Tavernier has produced historical dramas, black comedies, introspective end-of-life dramas and an interesting selection of documentaries.

Life and Nothing But (1989) starring Philippe Noiret

and *Capitaine Conan* (1996) with Philippe Torreton. These powerful anti-war films have been critically acclaimed with several international awards for their actors and for Tavernier as director.

Capitaine Conan, set in the Balkans, is a complex and intensely psychological film about a group of French soldiers fighting behind enemy lines, even after the war had formally ended in November, 1918, and the internal military politics that determine their fate. *Life and Nothing But* revolves around a French officer whose job is to find the dead and missing after the carnage of WWI. The film involves his relationship with distraught loved ones and families of the missing soldiers, and the pathetic efforts of one his fellow officers and the local government to find an appropriate corpse for an Unknown Soldier memorial.

Tavernier's most internationally successful film was *Round Midnight* (1986) dedicated to jazz musicians Bud Powell and Lester Young, and inspired by the friendship between Bud Powell and French illustrator Francis Paudras. The film, which pays tribute to the black musicians who lived and performed in Paris in the late 1950s, is without doubt the best of the few dramas produced about jazz performers. The film secured an Academy award nomination for its star Dexter Gordon.

Up until 1992 and the release of *L.627*, a drama about a police drug squad, Tavernier's films were generally of an introspective character, with almost painterly feel to them and often about older people. Films such as *A Sunday in the Country* (1984), *Life and Nothing But* and *Daddy Nostalgie* (1990) fit into this category.

But even when Tavernier produced science fiction dramas—such as *Death Watch* (1980) starring Harvey Keitel, Romy Schneider and Max Von Sydow, about a future society in which death is the new pornography—or the historical comedy adventure *D'Artagnan's Daughter* (1994), he brought a new approach to the subject. Irrespective of the genre, each film was permeated with a determination to eschew the usual clichés, style or imagery of the particular genre. And the great compassion Tavernier always has for his characters is neither cloying nor emotionally overblown, an approach rare by today's filmmaking standards.

Tavernier has also produced a substantial body of

provocative documentaries. They include his 1982 examination of the life of French Surrealist writer and poet Philippe Soupault, *Mississippi Blues* (1983), a survey of the music of the American south, *The Undeclared War* (1991), an account of the Algerian war, and more recently *The Other Side of the Tracks*, which deals with the conditions confronting impoverished immigrants in Paris.

Unfortunately Tavernier's large body of work is rarely screened in Australia. Hollywood's stranglehold over the cinema and film distribution networks ensures that the latest blockbusters and other mindless production-line efforts generally dominate. Video rental outlets are no better. Less than a quarter of Tavernier's films are available and only then from a handful of specialist outlets. For those who keep their wits and VCRs on alert, the government-owned Special Broadcasting Services television network occasionally shows some of his work.

Despite his attendance at the Sydney Film Festival, organisers screened only one of his films during the 12-day event. One hopes that someone will recognise the oversight and organise a major retrospective of this serious director's work some time in the near future.

Happily for Australian readers of the *World Socialist Web Site*, Tavernier's *It All Starts Today* will be released in national cinemas on August 26. If this film is screened in your part of the world make every effort to go and see it.

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