

# LOVE AND CONSEQUENCES

WITH 2 NEW FILMS ABOUT ROMANTIC PASSION AND ITS TURBULENT AFTERMATH, ACTOR LOUIS GARREL SECURES HIS REPUTATION AS FRANCE'S NEXT GREAT SEX SYMBOL

With his long, aristocratic nose, melancholy brow, and feminine mouth, Louis Garrel looks like he was born to tumble in and out of beds, and in and out of love. In nearly all of his ten feature films, including a pair of new ones out in America this spring, the 25-year-old French actor finds himself embroiled in passionate affairs, sordid trysts, tortured ménages à trois, homosexual dalliances, and incestuous desires, breaking hearts as he goes—including, often, his own. Invariably, there's lots of smoking and talk of books, and the women are coquettish, and Paris is cold, and someone usually dies before the movie's end. It's all very French.

So how do the French feel about Garrel as the embodiment of the modern psychosexual drama? Sitting in the back of Karl Lagerfeld's studio with a thick scarf wrapped around his head like a turban, cheeks still flushed from a moped ride in the winter chill, Garrel hesitates before answering. "I feel some aggressiveness against me as a representative of the bourgeoisie," he says, adding, "I know that I have a responsibility, because when you play in a movie, you do represent something to people." Sounding like one of his characters, he paraphrases a line from Sartre's *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme*: "When a young guy does something, he has to do it for his entire generation, whatever he does."

Yet while Garrel might be doing it for his generation, he is also deeply entwined with the generation that preceded him. His father is the accomplished French auteur Philippe Garrel, who cast him in his first film, *Emergency Kisses*, a metacomedy in which all the members of his family played themselves, when he was only 5. Garrel chose to pursue acting on his own at 15, after a teacher introduced him to film director François Truffaut and he discovered the actor Jean-Pierre Léaud. "I suddenly knew I wanted to be like Jean-Pierre Léaud," he recalls. "I wanted to act and live like Jean-Pierre Léaud. I mean, he was perfect."

In 2001, he landed his first starring role, opposite Jane Birkin. Two years later, he appeared in his best-known film, Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers*, a story of adolescent sexual gamesmanship set against the defining event of Garrel's father's generation, the student protests of 1968. Louis was 20 when he made the film, the same age that Philippe was when he, like Jean-Luc Godard and other French filmmakers, documented the violence at the barricades on film. Philippe wound up losing his negatives, but in 2005, he cast Louis in *Regular Lovers*, his own semi-autobiographical film about the Paris riots and the ensuing hangover. Working with his father couldn't have been more natural, Garrel says. "On the set, we've got the same relationship that we have in life, because in life he's like a master for me. There are so many things about him and his point of view of the world that I understand. He's truly a pacifist and a painter and a poet."

In *Regular Lovers*, the revolutionary fervor of the moment produces not the licentious intrigue of Bertolucci's film, but a gritty kind of attenuated romance (the score prominently features several songs by Nico, Philippe's lover during that era). The Garrels' new film together, *Frontiers of Dawn*, which will be released in the U.S. in March, takes a similar theme. Louis plays a young photographer assigned to take a portrait of a married starlet (Laura Smet), and the two promptly fall into a torrid affair, which, it is clear from the start, will not end well. But no matter what happens between them, neither character is able to break free. "My father finds it beautiful to speak of reciprocal love," Garrel says.

Clearly, he has inherited his father's sensibilities about beauty. Each of the four films he has made with director Christophe Honoré explores, in one way or another, reciprocal love and its attendant agonies. Theirs has become one of the great working relationships of French cinema, reminiscent of Léaud and Truffaut. "Maybe, because he was looking for himself as a director, he found his rhythm through me," Garrel says. In their first film together, *Ma Mère*, based on a book by Georges Bataille, they surpassed even Bertolucci's film for sexual provocation: Garrel plays a sulky young man who follows his mother, played by Isabelle Huppert, into a world of depraved sexuality while on extended vacation in the Canary Islands. Then they shifted gears for the intimate family drama *Dans Paris*, in which Garrel plays the playful, promiscuous younger brother to a deeply depressed Romain Duris. "The first time I saw *Ma Mère*, I panicked in the street," Garrel recalls. "My mom saw it and she was shocked. But after I saw *Dans Paris*, I saw Christophe could change so much in terms of style, and I knew that I loved him."

Their next film, *Love Songs*, was another stylistic shift, a musical inspired by Honoré's love for New Wave director Jacques Demy. ("He didn't know I could sing. Me neither, actually," Garrel says.) Here, Garrel plays the depressed character, trying to navigate life after the tragic dissolution of a ménage à trois. In their latest, *La Belle Personne*, which will also be released in the U.S. in March, Garrel plays a rumpled Italian teacher who becomes entirely too involved in the lives of his students, with disastrous consequences.

Looking at Garrel's work as a whole shows that however recurrent the themes may be, he is gifted with great range and depth. Yes, he has a persona, like Léaud, like Jean-Paul Belmondo, and like so many French greats before. But what especially distinguishes Garrel is his ability to move between brooding interiority and playful physicality, to demonstrate his passions by vamping in the street, or indicate the gulf between himself and his lover with a quick, flickering half-smile. What remains constant in his films is the evocation of a milieu: a bohemian Paris of frayed idealism, intellectual curiosity, creative passion, and immense sexual appetite that is either anachronistic or timeless, depending on your point of view.

Garrel says he'd like to make a film in Italy, and would love to work with Pedro Almodóvar, but he's clearly also intent on continuing to explore the world he knows. Last year, he made his first short film, *Mes Copains*, with members of his theater group, D'Ores et Déjà, as well as Huppert's daughter, Lolita Chammah, and his sister Esther. A vignette about a girl who romantically pits three friends against one another, it could almost be a sketch for one of his father's films. So does he hope to follow the elder Garrel behind the camera? "I don't know if I have the courage of the poet to make a normal movie," he responds. "It's really difficult, and I'm not comfortable at all. But I want to do another one." **Jesse Ashlock**

Louis Garrel in Paris, January 2009  
**Photography Karl Lagerfeld**  
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*La Belle Personne* and *Frontiers of Dawn* are out in March 2009 from IFC Films