

# RESNAIS RENAISSANCE

Jonathan Romney enjoys *Les Herbes folles*, a fitting culmination to the octogenarian director's career



'LES HERBES FOLLES': ANDRÉ DUSSOLLIER AND SABINE AZÉMA

It was an annus mirabilis for Alain Resnais in more ways than one. First, the 87-year-old veteran was the coolest man in Cannes. He showed up for his press conference in black suit and tie, red shirt and Ray-Bans that, added to his shock of white hair, made him look like Andy Warhol's French cousin. The shades weren't for style, but to protect his sensitive eyes, but Resnais' new film *'Les Herbes folles'* ('Wild Grass') showed his cinematic vision to be in no way impaired; indeed, this flamboyant, eccentric comedy was one of the most visually electric films in competition.

No one expected any major surprises from Resnais, who since the mid-1980s has been ploughing a particular furrow to mixed results. His preoccupation for over 20 years has been the porous borderline between film and theatre, resulting in two interpretations of Alan Ayckbourn, as well as such disappointments as 2003's clunky boulevard farce *'Pas sur la bouche'*. But *'Les Herbes folles'* proved a dazzling burst of new-found vigour and imagination, and won Resnais a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Cannes jury.



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This gesture from president Isabelle Huppert and colleagues was not, I think, a mere bow to Resnais' eminence, but an appropriate response to a film that is itself a compendium of Resnais' achievements over the years. Fans of his auteurism will especially welcome *'Les Herbes folles'*, as it is the first Resnais film to make connections between his theatrical work – with its traces of brittle Ayckbournesque farce – and his more experimental and enigmatic features. You can find echoes of *'Muriel ou Le temps d'un retour'* (1963) in the editing, *'Providence'* (1977) in the play between fiction, reality and consciousness, and even *'Last Year in Marienbad'* (1961) in the teasingly enigmatic tenor that dominates the whole film, despite its air of frothy Insouciance.

The film is based on a 1996 novel, *'L'Incident'* by Christian Gailly. (This is another link with the past – Gailly is published by Editions de Minuit, the bastion of French literary experimentation that was once the home of the nouveau roman and its leading light, 'Marienbad' writer Alain Robbe-Grillet.) The plot is slender, yet

yields bizarre complications. Dentist Marguerite Muir (Sabine Azéma) has her handbag stolen while out buying shoes. The bag and its contents are found by one Georges Palet (André Dussollier) who, on examining Marguerite's papers, becomes fascinated with this woman that he's never met.

The story seems to be developing into a gentle comedy about unrequited love, but the film – scripted by Alex Reval and Resnais' former assistant director Laurent Herbiet – refuses to conform to any conventional continuities of psychology. Georges stalks Marguerite, who is, at first, desperate to get rid of him. Then Marguerite finds herself falling for Georges. Various characters wind up at the Palets' suburban home, where Georges surprisingly ends up in a clinch with an otherwise marginal character. Things take a bizarre turn when Marguerite – attended by a group of singing male cohorts – takes the other characters for a flight in the wild blue yonder, suggesting that for the fiction unfolding before our eyes, the sky really is the limit.

As in his formally exploratory heyday, Resnais is fascinated with fiction and its processes: its making and unmaking, its evolution in the minds of the writer and reader/viewer. From the start, the film is presented as a narrative being told – with gaps, inconsistencies and hesitations – by an author-narrator, in a voiceover by Edouard Baer. Everything we see seems to emerge on the spot from the author's consciousness, its vagaries inflecting the way things appear. A passage of troubled speculation, for example, fixes upon a yellow handbag in slow-motion mid-flight. The author's uncertainty brings in its wake bizarre shifts of tone and shoals of red herrings: the never-resolved question, for example, of an incongruously dark secret in Georges' life.

The film's visual keynote is baroque excess. Eric Gautier's photography blazes with lurid primaries and neon overtones, while Jacques Saulnier's sets are overloaded with seemingly gratuitous detail, sometimes to the point of appearing cluttered.

*'Les Herbes folles'* is playful and often extremely funny. Vintage Resnais editing tricks bring especial spark to

Georges' Kafkaesque encounter with a duo of policemen (Michel Vuillermoz and Mathieu Amalric). But such comic pleasures are set against an undertow of mystery and disturbance running through the film from the very start (ominous shots of grass breaking through a cracked pavement) to the extraordinary ending. That final flourish sends the camera careering over fields, in and out of looming rocks, down a country lane and finally into a little girl's bedroom, where the sign-off line places a Dadaist question mark over everything that's gone before.

*'Les Herbes folles'* might easily have come from one of French cinema's young Turks – from the generation of Christophe Honoré, say. That it's the work of an octogenarian maestro is not merely a surprise, but a cause for rejoicing: this is a spectacular renaissance from Resnais and was the most completely pleasurable film at this year's festival. Needless to say, I can't wait to see it again.

ALAIN  
RESNAIS

