

Napoleon's return

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [July 31, 2002](#) issue

In a charming fantasia on how the last years of Napoleon's life might have gone, *The Emperor's New Clothes*—an adaptation of Simon Leys's novella *The Death of Napoleon*—features a Bonaparte who plots a daring escape from St. Helena. He plants a double, a sailor named Eugene Lenormand, in his place while he steals back to Paris to reclaim his power. Both figures are played with brio by Ian Holm.

There's a small but distinguished strain of movies about the doubling of men in power—Rossellini's *General Della Rovere* and Kurosawa's *Kagemusha* come to mind. (*Dave*, about a man who stands in for the U.S. president, is less distinguished.) But they tend to focus on the way in which the performance transforms the commoner—how he stretches himself to fill the role, acquires greatness, first by chance and circumstance and then by earning it. *The Emperor's New Clothes* flips this pattern: it's mostly concerned with the metamorphosis of Napoleon; Eugene is merely an ingenious and hilarious comic device.

Napoleon's plan is frustrated by the death of his main contact in Paris and by Eugene's willful refusal to admit, at the arranged time, that he's a fake; he finds the life of a famous conqueror in exile, stuffing his face and dictating his alleged memoirs, far more agreeable than that of a paltry deckhand. So Napoleon, stuck in limbo, is forced to adapt to the life of an anonymous middle-class Parisian.

The unrecognized Napoleon goes by the name of his double, but the existence he adopts is that of a loyal, deceased Bonapartist, a produce merchant named Truchaut. Truchaut's widow, Nicole, known as Pumpkin, is on the brink of bankruptcy, her furniture dispossessed. (The beautiful Iben Hjejle, who played John Cusack's girl friend in *High Fidelity*, is touching in this role.) Truchaut wasn't a very good businessman. He wasn't much of a husband, either, having abandoned Pumpkin the morning after their marriage to fight for his emperor.

Napoleon, whose identity she is unaware of, attains shelter in her home and wins her friendship when he brings his organizational genius to bear on her failing business; finally he wins her love. With the canny young orphan (Giovanni Gianasso)

she has unofficially adopted, "Eugene" and Pumpkin become a family, thriving, ironically, in the peaceful days after the Napoleonic wars.

The movie was written by Kevin Molony, who fleshes out Leys's novella and softens the tone. The director is Alan Taylor, whose only other feature is the scruffy, offbeat heist comedy *Palookaville* (which too few people have seen), but who also did some of the best episodes of *The Sopranos* and several of *Sex and the City*, both on HBO. Visually, *The Emperor's New Clothes* is lush and enchanted, especially in the moonlit scenes that detail Napoleon's escape from St. Helena.

The tempo is perhaps too leisurely; the film sometimes feels a little poky, especially in the section just before the protagonist, feeling he's allowed himself to be distracted from his mission by the bourgeois pleasures of life with Pumpkin, tries to revive his scheme to regain power. But the idea at the movie's heart allows for more variations than you expect, and it grows in your mind as you contemplate it. The theme is the nature of greatness. Napoleon never doubts his greatness, or that what constitutes greatness in the eyes of the world—audacity, will, conquest—represents the most laudable attributes of a human being. But Pumpkin, who lost the man she loved when he enlisted in the service, sees only disaster in the wake of the emperor's reign. For her, happiness is more devoutly to be desired. More than that: to want to be great, in Napoleon's definition of greatness, is madness. The film's climactic sequence—which is a knockout—dramatizes that theme.

Tim McInnerny plays the doctor who figures out the identity of the stranger but keeps the information to himself. His role in the narrative is confusing: since he's motivated by his own love for Pumpkin, and disappointed that it's "Eugene" she selects to take Trufaut's place, you'd expect him to act on what he knows rather than conceal it. Otherwise the story is worked out in a very satisfying manner. Small-scale as it is, *The Emperor's New Clothes* is the kind of art-house film that rarely gets made: the kind that spins off a genuinely original idea rather than shining up old platitudes, and that makes you eager to talk about it afterwards.