

# French farce

By [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [June 1, 2004](#) issue

The German occupation of France, a sinister and embarrassing epoch for the French, tends to be treated by them with dutiful solemnity or avoided altogether. Therefore the gleeful irreverence of Jean-Paul Rappeneau and his team of screenwriters in *Bon Voyage* is refreshing, even liberating. In this respect it recalls John Boorman's 1987 memoir of growing up during the Blitz, *Hope and Glory*, which cleared the air of decades of sentimentality and self-glorification.

*Bon Voyage* doesn't have the depth of *Hope and Glory*, but it manages the enviable trick of making the era simultaneously hilarious and exciting. And it's a gorgeous piece of filmmaking. Thierry Arbogast's cinematography has the storybook richness of 1940s Technicolor, only slightly aged. Visually the movie has the happy-surprise quality of a chest of old magazines discovered in an attic. The imagery is continually surprising, too, and playful, as in the shot of thieves breaking into a warehouse taken from the interior, which suggests we're watching the robbery from the point of view of the cases of wine.

The narrative consists of a series of colliding plots. Isabelle Adjani, displaying a reckless farceur's gift that her long career hasn't tapped previously, plays Viviane, a movie star who shoots her wealthy lover and then asks a young admirer, Frédéric (Grégori Derangère), to dispose of the body. He gets caught, convicted of the murder and sent to prison. But he escapes with the aid of a cheerful crook named Raoul (Yvan Attal in a delightful performance—a send-up of other romantic French outlaws).

On a train Frédéric encounters a pretty student (Virginie Ledoyen) who's struggling to get her mentor (Jean-Marc Stehlé) across the channel—partly because he's a Jew and partly because he's been developing plans for the atomic bomb that he's desperate to keep out of the hands of the Nazis. Frédéric tries to enlist Viviane's current squeeze, a government minister (Gérard Depardieu at his most skillful), to help the escaping professor, but of course he's on the lam himself. And Viviane has yet another swain paying court to her, a journalist named Winckler. He's played by

Peter Coyote, the only American in this crew. He doesn't seem very comfortable in this ensemble until you find out who his character really is. At that point the casting all comes together.

The characters are constantly on the run, and they keep running into each other. Rappeneau evokes a mood of wartime chaos, as hordes of Parisians retreat from the German invasion, but finds in the events a bottomless comic resource. It's a big movie, full of immensely populated set-piece sequences (some of them are spectacular escape scenarios). There's a wonderful lack of self-consciousness in the way Rappeneau pulls them off, without lingering on the crowds or in any way interrupting the breakneck pace.

He pulls off something else that's almost as hard: he turns Frédéric and Camille, the professor's assistant, into Resistance heroes without sacrificing the comedy. In one scene, Winckler sends the Nazi hoodlums to handle the pesky nephew of Viviane's dead lover, who keeps coming on to her and has also managed to blow Frédéric's cover. This must be the first time a movie has ever used the Nazi villains so familiar from melodrama to dispose of a character whose presence is inconvenient for the hero. And the sleek narcissist Viviane isn't the femme fatale you might expect. She is depicted as sublimely silly; her amorality fits her like the sumptuous costumes she wears. (Adjani is a magnificent clotheshorse in this picture.)

Among the cast is Aurore Clément, who was introduced to international audiences in Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* (1974), perhaps the best nondocumentary film about the occupation to come out of France. Her presence in *Bon Voyage* is a kind of touchstone, and her aristocratic elegance enhances the film's glamour.