

## **Welcome to New York review – Gérard Depardieu offers naked ambition**

In recent years, Gérard Depardieu seems to have taken his lead from Iggy Pop's song I Need More, with its lyric: "I need to lead a dissipated [sic] existence... and enjoy my decline." Depardieu certainly seems to be relishing his decline with brazen gusto. It's generally assumed that these days le grand Gégé really can't be bothered, that he's not just phoning in his performances but getting his sommelier to email them in. He's not lazy, though; he's chalked up 26 feature credits since 2010 but is far too willing to sign up for obscurities, half-baked prestige pieces and occasional stints munching boar in the money-spinning *Astérix* comedies.

Yet now and then Depardieu will do something remarkable, often with an edge of self-portraiture that alludes to his past or to his ever-expanding girth, or both. He made a very personal statement playing a seemingly clapped-out but nonetheless proud showbiz survivor in *The Singer* (2006), in which his character offered the insight: "People become corny when they last." And he proudly stripped down to his behemoth bulk in the outre comedy *Mammuth* (2010), about an ex-biker in search of his past: an insouciant take-me-as-you-find-me gesture by the man who these days is not so much Jabba the Hutt as Jabba le Château.

In short, Depardieu is ready to deliver when teamed with a director who's game for something risky and there's none gamier than Abel Ferrara. Once America's acclaimed master of the down and dirty in films such as *The Driller Killer* and *Bad Lieutenant*, Ferrara has spent a few years in the wilderness. But his *Welcome to New York* caused a big stir in Cannes this year, not least because it is overtly inspired (although the actual story is fictional, insists the opening disclaimer) by the case of former IMF head Dominique Strauss-Kahn, who was accused of sexually assaulting a hotel chambermaid in New York in 2011.

Depardieu plays a powerful French executive named Devereaux, first seen trying to butter up an unwelcome official with the insistent ministrations of his female staff. Devereaux then checks into a fancy Manhattan hotel where, before he's even taken off his raincoat, he's tussling with call girls, prior to much splashing of champagne and smearing of ice cream. No sooner have the women left the premises than the next contingent reports for duty (believe it or not, Ferrara actually shows us a revolving door).

After considerable longueurs of huffing, puffing and bottom-slapping, the film takes a sobering turn when Devereaux tries to force himself on a hotel worker. The

incident gets him arrested and gives us the film's most compelling passage, as Devereaux is locked up with some tough-looking detainees (he returns their menacing glances with Olympian disdain) and later strip-searched. This proves an arduous business that appears to cause the actor himself some real discomfort, grunting away with exhaustion ("Some workout, huh?" a guard marvels) and, in what must surely be inspired improv on Depardieu's part, neglecting to replace his underpants when he dresses.

This moment of nakedness, humiliating for Devereaux, is an audacious, imposing feat of self-exposure by the man who plays him, more like performance art than acting and more evocative of a real human being than the sex scenes, which border on grotesque farce. But all in all it's hard to buy Devereaux as a fully-formed character. One scene is amusing but ludicrous: over lunch with his daughter and her fiance, Devereaux can't help talking dirty ("Bouillabaisse – it is the sex party of the fishes!"). We get precious little sense of what he does for a living; Ferrara and co-writer Christ Zois provide scant evidence to suggest that we're seeing a major transatlantic potentate rather than just a grubby bon vivant with surprisingly rusty English.

The film's real revelation is a ferocious performance by Jacqueline Bisset as Devereaux's long-suffering wife, Simone. Her first big scene with Depardieu, in the couple's luxury rented Manhattan house, is theatrical and claustrophobic but phenomenally tense, with Bisset evoking enraged majesty as a woman who knows that, finally, the real power rests with her.

Fatally overstretched, *Welcome to New York* runs itself into a morose impasse in the final stretch. But in any case, what is the film really about? Sexual addiction? The corrupting effect of wealth and power? Or America itself, as the title suggests? Hard to say: early on it gives us a montage of bullion and banknotes and a folk rendition of *America the Beautiful*, but barely delivers on the themes so clumsily invoked. Neither does it sustain the critical distance suggested by a pre-credits sequence in which Depardieu, as lui-même, tells journalists that he accepted the Devereaux role because he doesn't like politicians (Russian ones excepted, presumably).

Instead, the film largely comes across as a scabrous, semi-improvised cinematic art event, with a brazen streak of tabloid sensationalism. There are touches of brilliance, moments of discomforting honesty on Depardieu's part and much self-indulgence. But it's good to see Ferrara back, if only because few directors today would attempt to whip up a bouillabaisse this intensely seasoned.

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