

Fauteuils d'orchestre / Avenue Montaigne (2006)

Director: Danièle Thompson

Screenplay: Christopher Thompson,
Danièle Thompson

Cast: Jessica: Cécile de France; Catherine:
Valérie Lemercier; Jean-François: Albert
Dupontel; Valentine: Laura Morante;
Jacques: Claude Brasseur

Awards: Best Supporting Actress (Valérie
Lemercier), César Awards (2007)



One of the most successful French films of 2006, *Avenue Montaigne* demonstrates that the current trend of light and bubbly romantic comedies is not an exclusively American phenomenon. However, despite its free and easy demeanor, it flexes some emotional muscle as its characters struggle with life, transition, and each other. Set amidst concert halls and art galleries on the famous Avenue Montaigne in a semi-mythical Paris, the film follows Jessica, a young woman who, inspired by stories of her grandmother's youth, sets out to experience the city for herself. After quickly securing a job as a waitress, she becomes involved with the lives of the artistic elite working in various venues surrounding the café. As a sympathetic ear and muse, Jessica witnesses the struggles of a disenchanting virtuoso pianist, a scattered-brained, hardworking and yet frustrated soap-opera actress, and an aging art collector selling his whole collection.

Although the film does in fact take place on Avenue Montaigne, the original French title, *Fauteuils d'orchestre*—referring to the seats occupied by the audience—is perhaps more instructive as it references the philosophical thread of the film. As the story progresses, Jessica learns that the ability to appreciate art, here standing in for life, is often a matter of perspective: if you take a seat too close or too far away, you will not be able to see enough to understand.

Danièle Thompson's quick and careful editing and use of color add to the bright and lively tone of the film. Clearly, the Paris of the film is meant to be a warm and inviting place, recognizable to all audiences. But there are also many quick jokes rooted in French culture, such as the Simone de Beauvoir hair-style revealed when Catherine whips off her enormous hat on stage, and the line-up of Jean-Paul Sartre look-alikes waiting for an audition.

Avenue Montaigne is the third film directed by Thompson, a long time screenwriter, whose other directing credits are the black comedy *La Bûche* (1999) and the romantic comedy *Jet Lag* (2002). Because of her extensive background in screenwriting and her new passion for directing, it would not be unfair to compare Thompson to U.S. screenwriter-director Nora Ephron, writer of *Sleepless in Seattle* and *You've Got Mail*, amongst others. Both are the daughters of successful screenwriters and have transitioned to directing their own airy and yet decidedly pleasurable romantic comedies. With *Avenue Montaigne* continues the family tradition, sharing the screenwriting credit with her son Christopher Thompson.

Program notes prepared by: Eric Dalle, Tricia Dimit, Paul Hartley, Aubrey Korneta, Lauren Messina, Bill Pedersen, Émilie Tarraf.