Movie Review *Ridicule*

Twilight of the Witty But Supremely Shallow

By JANET MASLIN Published: November 27, 1996

Teetering on the brink of revolution, the French aristocrats in Patrice Leconte's discreetly scathing ''Ridicule'' indulge in a decadence that is peculiarly their own. They place the utmost value on cruel, wounding wit, which is used for the entertainment value of humiliating others as well as to define each speaker's precise caste among fellow courtiers.

Artfully, and with an elegant malevolence that suits this ornate and quietly sardonic costume drama, Mr. Leconte makes it clear that this is no laughing matter. While the characters in ''Ridicule'' imagine that they live or even die by the bon mot, the year is 1783, six years before the real ax falls. The film fully appreciates the ridiculousness of drawing-room repartee in the face of this.

Mr. Leconte, known here for ''Monsieur Hire'' and ''The Hairdresser's Husband,'' makes it immediately clear that this is a vicious game. His film begins with the shocking spectacle of the ancient Count de Blayac being visited by one of his enemies, who urinates on the helpless old man to settle some unknown score. When the Count dies soon afterward, the talk at his funeral shows the same genteel savagery. ''I'd rather bury him alive, but God is our master,'' whispers one guest.

Into this sly, decorous atmosphere, which is rich with the kind of boudoir chicanery that shaped ''Dangerous Liaisons,'' comes the incongruously decent Gregoire Ponceludon de Malavoy (Charles Berling, making a coolly effective screen debut). He arrives from the provinces with the hope of persuading Louis XVI to finance a swamp drainage project so that the peasants on his land will not die of mosquito-carried diseases. But the court to which Ponceludon brings his case is a place where a cleric may say about sick peasants, ''They're not only dying, they're boring!''

Quickly and nimbly, Ponceludon discovers that he must try to beat the courtiers at their own parlor games if he is to win the King's interest. One woman who becomes crucial to his plans is the widow de Blayac, an imperious creature who has children blow dusting powder from silver trays after her bath. Played as a figure of supreme shallowness by the ever-glamorous Fanny Ardant, the Countess is offset by the story's earnest young heroine, Mathilde, who looks fetchingly fresh, takes her inspiration from Rousseau and is defiantly wit-free. The courtiers, by contrast, invoke the exalted memory of Voltaire in ways that finally prompt Ponceludon to exclaim, ''Voltaire would have wept!''

Because a fair share of this film's value is decorative, Mathilde is played by beautiful Judith Godreche (also making her debut) as a ravishing country girl, half-scientist, half-milkmaid. Her father (Jean Rochefort, a deadpan delight) is a doctor who helps Ponceludon, even though he himself is terribly worried about the fine points of witty dueling. The doctor keeps a file of clever remarks, repeats some dubious ones (from a man shot in the head by a cannonball: ''I fear I'm losing my mind!'') and is filled with remorse when he thinks up a good rejoinder two hours too late.

While all this shallowness risks becoming self-defeating, Mr. Leconte keeps his own rapier reasonably sharp. As written by Remi Waterhouse, who draws on real historical detail here, ''Ridicule'' satirizes this world of absurd protocol while it proves that skewering fatuousness and snobbery, however obviously, is never out of style.

Among the film's more piquant historical touches are a scene in which deaf-mutes mocked by these aristocrats wind up having the last laugh, and another in which a visit is paid to the French court by an American Sioux warrior, whose regalia is duly criticized. ''And yet, he almost makes us look ridiculous,'' one of the film's foppish characters observes. No one really listens.   
  
RIDICULE   
  
Directed by Patrice Leconte; written by Remi Waterhouse with the collaboration of Michel Fessler and Eric Vicaut; director of photography, Thierry Arbogast; edited by Joelle Hache; music by Antoine Duhamel; production designer, Ivan Maussion; produced by Gilles Legrand, Frederic Brillion and Philippe Carcassonne; released by Miramax Zoe. Running time: 102 minutes. This film is rated R.   
  
WITH: Charles Berling (Ponceludon de Malavoy), Jean Rochefort (Marquis de Bellegarde), Fanny Ardant (Madame de Blayac), Judith Godreche (Mathilde de Bellegarde) and Bernard Giraudeau (Abbot de Vilecourt)

### Awards

##### Win

* Best Foreign Film - 1996 Broadcast Film Critics Association
* Best Foreign Film - 1996 National Board of Review
* Best Art Direction - [Ivan Maussion](http://www.nytimes.com/movies/person/101793/Ivan-Maussion) - 1996 French Academy of Cinema
* Best Costume Design - [Christian Gasc](http://www.nytimes.com/movies/person/91112/Christian-Gasc) - 1996 French Academy of Cinema
* Best Director - [Patrice Leconte](http://www.nytimes.com/movies/person/99108/Patrice-Leconte) - 1996 French Academy of Cinema
* Best French Film - 1996 French Academy of Cinema

##### Nomination

* Best Foreign Language Film - 1996 Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences