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'Danton' enlivens crazy epoch

By STEVE VINEBERG

After the debacle of *The Moon in the Gutter*, it's a pleasure to watch Gerard Depardieu in *Danton*. Depardieu is an extraordinarily instinctual actor, but his performance in *The Moon in the Gutter* consisted of a series of poses suggested by every restless young Hollywood actor from John Garfield to James Dean, presented seriously. The director, Jean-Jacques Beinix, blocked the flow of Depardieu's impulses: He continued to take the camera wonderfully but he acted like a corpse.

As the French Revolutionary leader whose last days *Danton* chronicles, Depardieu looks more alive than he has in any role since the well-intentioned, blundering husband in *Get Out Your Handkerchiefs*, and he has so much wit and personality that no one else on screen is a match for him. His Danton is a sensualist and a star — he knows he enjoys the idolatry of the Parisians and he plays up to them as well as playing hard-to-get with them. He has the savvy of a celebrity. Depardieu has said that he used Muhammad Ali as a role model for some of Danton's flourishes, and (as usual) his instincts served him well — Danton is a champion, even in defeat (i.e., under the guillotine). The last words he speaks to the crowd are hushed, because days of shouted oratory at his trial have made him hoarse; he exhibits his laryngitis like a battle scar.

Danton, directed by the Polish filmmaker Andrzej Wajda and written by Jean-Claude Carrière and others (based on Stanislaw Prsybyszewska's play *L'Affaire Danton*), is a vigorous historical spectacle that gives the constant impression of forward motion. Characters and events are drawn in bold strokes, so that we have no trouble determining the issues or interpreting which side the film is on: A humanistic treatment of the French Revolution, it condemns the Reign of Terror unequivocally. (Apparently Wajda's unsympathetic depiction of the revolution caused a stir when the film premiered in Paris.) Except for Depardieu, the actors — including two directors, Patrice Chéreau and Roger Planchon, who are among the luminaries of the Parisian stage — work as expert caricaturists. Whatever you may think of their aggressive, emblematic performances, you can tell the characters apart: nervous, morally rigid Philippeaux; wide-eyed Legendre, who speaks rousing in the Convention in Danton's defense; the editor Des-



moulin, who squints and buries his anger in his compulsive writing; Fouquier, the head of the People's Tribunal, with his aristocratic mien. And of course Robespierre (Wojcieck Pszoniak), Danton's opposite number and nemesis, who denies himself physical pleasures and, on the morning of Danton's execution, looks more drained of life than his enemy's trunkless head.

When you see the riots in the Convention, the speakers shouting the crowd to silence and twisting their faces into hilarious grimaces, the factions whispering urgently to each other in the corridors, where of course their foes can easily overhear them, you think, "What an amazing, crazy epoch!" Wajda's passionate sweep and his recognition of the farcical element embedded in any grand gesture may not add up to great history, but they are a welcome relief from the usual cautious approach taken by the makers of historical epics. In the courtly, boring *La Nuit de Varennes*, set in the same period, the actors could barely summon up enough energy to change costumes, and in last year's scandalously beribboned *Gandhi*, historical events were shunted off into the corners of the film — as if to actually enjoy the story would have been a crass self-indulgence in the midst of all this spirituality. Unlike Robespierre, Wajda is no ascetic. In *Danton*, you keep your eyes open and you laugh right out loud.