

Document Citation

Title	Arsene Lupin
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Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	2004 Oct 04
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	105
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Arsène Lupin, Salomé, Jean-Paul, 2004

ARSENE LUPIN

(FRANCE-U.K.-SPAIN-ITALY)

An SND release (in France) of a Stephane Marsil & SND presentation of a Hugo Films/M6 Films/TF1 Films Production (France), Poisson Rouge Pictures (U.K.), Vertigo Films (Spain), RAI Cinema (Italy) co-production. (International sales: TF1 Intl, Boulogne, France.) Produced by Stephane Marsil. Executive producer, Alain Peyrollaz.

Directed by Jean-Paul Salome. Screenplay, Salome, Laurent Vachaud, freely inspired by Maurice Leblanc's "La Comtesse De Cagliostro." Camera (color, widescreen), Pascal Rida; editor, Marie-Pierre Renaud; music, Debbie Wiseman; production designer, Francoise Dupertuis; costume designer, Pierre-Jean Larroque; sound (Dolby), Dean Humphreys, Laurent Poirier; hair and wigs, Jean Archibald; makeup, Kathy Ducker, Frederique Ney; visual effects supervisor, Rodolphe Chabrier; associate producer, Christophe Granier-Deferre; assistant director, Ludovic Bernard; casting, Stephane Foenkinos, Louis Hammond. Reviewed at UGC Normandie, Paris, Sept. 21, 2004. (In Toronto Film Festival, Gala.) Running time: 131 MIN.

With Romain Duris, Kristin Scott Thomas, Pascal Greggory, Eva Green, Robin Renucci, Patrick Toomey, Mathieu Carriere, Philippe Magnan, Marie Bunel, Philippe Lemaire, Francoise Lepine, Jessica Boyde, Gaelle Vincent, Guillaume Huet, Adele Cseh, Aurelien Wilk.

By LISA NESSELSON

A thoroughly entertaining period romp bursting with intrigue, "Arsene Lupin" is a keenly crafted take on the gentleman burglar whose adventures in *fin de siecle* Paris are immortalized in 18 popular novels by Maurice Leblanc (1864-1941). Elaborate treasure hunt has visual sweep and a terrific cast of scheming characters that range from merely craven to genuinely evil. Liberties taken with title gent, played by a perhaps insufficiently suave Romain Duris, may rep a stumbling block for locals. But offshore auds, unencumbered by expectations or precedent (Lupin has been played previously by dashing thespians Jules Berry, Jean-Claude Brialy and Jean-Pierre Cassel among others) will find much to enjoy.

In 1882, future nimble-fingered master of disguise Arsene Lupin is a boy (Guillaume Huet) living in Normandy with his mother (Marie Bunel) and father Jean (Aurelien Wilk) — a rumored thief. Jean is teaching his son to box when government officials arrive to arrest him. Dad's advice prior to making a daring escape will serve the lad well: "Distract your prey — that's the key. Remember that and you'll never get caught."

Mother and son are turned out from the chateau of wealthy relative Dreux-Soubise (Robin Renucci), a Royalist who belongs to a determined group that includes Beaumagnan (Pascal Greggory), Bonnetot (Philippe Magnan), Cardinal D'Etigues (Philippe Lemaire) and the Duc D'Orleans (Mathieu Carriere), all intent on reinstating the monarchy.

Fifteen years later, Lupin (Duris) is working under an alias, deftly relieving women of their jewels on an ocean liner en route for Le Havre. He has a Robin Hood-style work ethic, stealing only from those whose gains were ill-gotten.

When Lupin first meets Josephine, the countess of Cagliostro (Kristin Scott Thomas), under highly dramat-



DANDY DOINGS: Kristin Scott Thomas plays a countess and Romain Duris the larcenous title character in "Arsene Lupin."

ic circumstances, she rejects the idea of a partnership — in crime or otherwise. Fetching, as always, in corset-based finery, Scott Thomas gives a dandy perf as a woman of mystery whose delicate beauty is at odds with her iron will.

Most of the characters — some as violent as they are relentless — are on the trail of jewels the King is believed to have hidden before his rendezvous with the guillotine. As in any rollicking adventure tale, the prospect of infinite wealth has a way of warping human behavior.

Although ambitious venture is designed, thespied and lensed with verve and bravado, some viewers may find pic's gleeful overload of dark secrets, shifting allegiances and swashbuckling combat scenes cumulatively exhausting.

Told with flair and sufficient means in sumptuously convincing locations augmented by excellent digital effects work, Jean-Paul Salome's highly visual storytelling is grounded in deep-seated motivations — alongside frivolous fun.

Lupin's resourceful blend of insouciance, physical grace, quick-wittedness and guts makes him a very appealing character on which to hang a film. The role requires lots of inventive makeup — although Duris' skull and teeth are so distinctive one would think he'd be found out more often.

Evocative costumes, a feel for the bustling but dangerous Paris of a century ago and the chutzpah to throw in some unlikely genre elements a la "Brotherhood of the Wolf" add up to a package both funny and touching, tinged with history. No film should be penalized for seeking to entertain, but pic is so dense with layers of intrigue — and boasts nearly as many pre-endings as the final installment in "The Lord of the Rings" — that some viewers may cry uncle before the poignant conclusion.

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