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DVD REVIEWS

Inside the mind of a master

With 'The 400 Blows,' director François Truffaut and his screen alter ego were off and running. Now they're together again in a new five-disc package.

By SUSAN KING
Times Staff Writer

Criterion's remarkable new five-disc "The Adventures of Antoine Doinel" DVD set offers indelible insight into the psyche of the late French director François Truffaut. The set features all five of Truffaut's films that explore the life and loves of his semiautobiographical character, Antoine Doinel, whom he introduced in his landmark first feature, "The 400 Blows," in 1959 and bid farewell to in his 1979 comedy "Love on the Run."

However, during the two decades between the first and last films, Truffaut matured and evolved, whereas Doinel remained the ultimate Peter Pan, a charming child-man who refused to grow up. Even in an interview conducted shortly after the release of "Love on the Run," Truffaut confessed he was dissatisfied with the film and Doinel's evolution. His alter ego, Truffaut acknowledged, had turned into a portrait of a failure. And Jean-Pierre Léaud, who played Doinel, is so linked to the role that he ran into typecasting problems.

Truffaut, who was born in 1932, had a rough childhood. Unloved by his parents, Truffaut found solace in the cinema and would spend more time at film clubs and Parisian movie theaters than at school. Though an avid reader, he quit school at 14, and the following year began his own film club and met his mentor, critic André Bazin. The older man even came to Truffaut's aid when he was jailed for deserting the army. Shortly after his release from prison in 1953, Truffaut began writing for the landmark publication *Cahiers du Cinema*. Truffaut, along with such future filmmakers as Jean-Luc Godard, extolled the virtues of directors whom they considered auteurs — Alfred Hitchcock, Nicholas Ray and John Ford, for example — who put their personal stamp on their films.

At age 27, he made his first feature-length film, "The 400 Blows," which put Truffaut on the international map. The haunting, humanistic drama revolved around 14-year-old Antoine — virtually ignored by his parents and misunderstood by his teachers — who enters into petty crime and eventually is sent to a bleak reform school. Antoine's oblique gaze into the camera in the final freeze-frame of the film is just one reason he has intrigued and fascinated audiences and critics for the past 44 years.

The first disc of the DVD set, which retails for \$100, includes a new digital transfer of "The 400 Blows" and two audio commentaries: an overanalytic discussion with cinema professor Brian Stonehill and a far more satisfying one with Truffaut's lifelong



Fox Lorber Features

A TEEN HEADED FOR TROUBLE: A young Jean-Pierre Léaud, left, makes his first appearance as Antoine Doinel in Truffaut's 1959 film "The 400 Blows."



Fox Lorber Features

IN LOVE: Léaud in the short film "Antoine and Colette" (1962), the second chapter in the Antoine Doinel saga.

friend Robert Lachenay. There's also terrific, rare audition footage with Léaud and his co-stars Patrick Auffay and Richard Kanayan and newsreel footage of Léaud at the Cannes screening of "The 400 Blows."

The disc also includes an interview from a French TV program with Truffaut discussing the origins of Antoine and another TV interview in which he talks about the box office in America for "The 400 Blows" and gives his own critical impression of the film.

Rounding out the disc is a new transfer of "Antoine and Colette," the second chapter in the saga — a short film that appeared in the 1962 omnibus film "Love at Twenty." This time around, teenage Doinel is out of reform school, living on his own and falling in love for the first time with a beautiful young woman (Marie-France Pisier), who sees him more as a friend.

By the time Truffaut made his third Antoine Doinel film, the enchanting 1968 "Stolen Kisses," he was 35, the father of two daughters and one of the top international directors. Unlike the first two Antoine films, "Stolen Kisses" is far sunnier and funnier. It is also the first shot in color. In this outing, the sweet

but clueless Antoine is dishonorably discharged from the army, back in Paris and looking for work. He ends up at a detective agency, where he proves to be one of the most inept shamuses in the City of Light.

The DVD of "Stolen Kisses" features a crisp new digital transfer and an introduction by film historian Serge Toubiana, who discusses the turmoil going on in the film community in France in 1968. Henri Langlois was fired as director of the Cinematheque Française that year, which caused several filmmakers and actors — including Truffaut and Léaud — to protest. There's newsreel footage of one of the protests that turned violent and promotional spots and newsreel footage from that tumultuous year in France.

Two years later, Truffaut revisited Antoine in the bitter-sweet comedy "Bed and Board." This time, the perplexed Antoine is married, expecting his first child and still attempting to find gainful employment. But his life threatens to unravel when he becomes involved with a beautiful Japanese woman.

Besides a new digital transfer, the disc features behind-the-scenes footage of Truffaut directing a comedic scene with

Léaud, as well as an interview with the director and co-star Claude Jade. Truffaut and co-writer Bernard Revon appear in a documentary in which they illustrate how they get their ideas for their scripts and the soft-spoken Léaud appears in a rare TV interview, discussing Truffaut and Antoine.

When "Bed and Board" was released, both Truffaut and Léaud said the book was finished on Antoine Doinel. But Truffaut admitted it was difficult to give him up, and nine years later he unfortunately decided to resurrect Antoine for "Love on the Run." The final chapter finds Antoine divorced, a semi-successful novelist and an incurable romantic. As he pursues a new woman, a young record store sales clerk, he encounters previous loves and examines his life via flashbacks of the other films. "Love on the Run," however, plays more like a clip episode of a TV reunion special, and Léaud, who seems tired and bloated, lacks the charm and passion of the previous four films.

Like the others, "Love on the Run" features a new digital transfer, a TV interview with Truffaut and the film's co-star and co-writer Marie-France Pisier and an excerpt from a 1980 French TV show in which Truffaut talks about his disappointment with the film.

The fifth disc of the collection includes a lovely new transfer of "Les Mistons," Truffaut's acclaimed 1957 short film about adolescent boys, with informative commentary by then-assistant director and future writing collaborator Claude de Givray and an early TV interview with Truffaut.

Truffaut died of a brain tumor in 1984 at age 52. Léaud, who turns 59 today, suffered a nervous breakdown after the death of his mentor. The actor, though, seems to have recovered from his personal problems and continues to work, most notably in the acclaimed 1996 film "Irma Vep." But to the international film world, he will always be known as Antoine Doinel.