The Dinner Guest (L’Invite)

Talent: Daniel Auteuil, Thierry Lhermitte, Valerie Lemercier, Hippolyte Girardot.

Date of review: Thursday 10th April, 2008

Director: Laurent Bouhnik
Duration: 82 minutes
Classification: PG
We rate it: 2 and stars.

Daniel Auteuil, the ubiquitous French actor who is as talented as he is prolific, has spent at least twenty years now as an A-list performer in his native country. Making quite an impression as the love-struck country bumpkin in the much-loved Jean de Florette (1986), and making many films over the years with his wife Emmanuelle Beart, Auteuil has lately been seen in everything from touching stories of disability (The Eighth Day) to unnerving psychological thrillers (Hidden) and gorgeous romantic comedies (Apres Vous). Here, working with three other skilled performers, Auteuil is in fluffy comic territory, but, sadly, both script and director Laurent Bouhnik have let him down.

Auteuil plays Gerard, a 52-year-old Parisian business-worker who has been out of work for three years, and whose apartment, marriage and future happiness all seem to hinge upon his attaining gainful employment as soon as is possible. His ditzy wife, Colette (Lemercier) understands the importance of Gerard’s getting a new job, and when his latest interview progresses to the shortlist stage, husband and wife are both excited and terrified that something might go wrong. The final stage of the interview, you see, is to take place at their apartment; they’re to have Gerard’s prospective boss over to dinner, and the success of the evening will determine the success of the application.

Enter the couple’s new upstairs neighbour, Alexandre (Lhermitte) a man who claims to be a kind of “image stylist”, a consultant who hires his services to people wishing to make a lasting public impression bristling with style and grace. Alexandre claims to have coached many a star in public image, conversational technique and general grooming, and is a dab hand with cooking and wine selection as well. When he meets the nervous couple while trying to track down the source of a water leak in their apartment, he sees the bind they’re in regarding the impending dinner date, and offers his help. It’s at this point, of course, that everything begins to go terribly wrong.
The Dinner Guest was based upon a stage play, and it’s easy to see how this light fare could, if treated with deft enough hands, have made a highly amusing entry in the long list of door-slamming, domestic French farces. On screen, however, all we really end up seeing is the sluggish procession of a series of rather tired gags, delivered by performers who are so clearly capable of so much more that they can’t help but appear bored at the fluff they’re performing here. Director Bouhnik and editor Herve de Luze (a technician who is capable of extraordinary work) really needed to inject a substantial dose of visual energy into The Dinner Guest in order to make it crackle with the laughs it might have had on stage; sadly, though, this dull production drags along (even at such a short running-time) and leaves its audience as tired as the film’s rather pathetic central couple. For those who have seen the kind of amazing work the actors in this piece are capable of, The Dinner Guest will probably feel as unsatisfying as the meal that never quite makes it to the table.

Nick Prescott