

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2024/25 SEASON**



THE INNOCENT
(Language: French, Spanish, English)

Director: Louis Garrel

UK Release: 2023

Running time: 99 minutes

Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 15 January 2025

“This droll French-language caper, Abel’s much-married mother has finally found love, with an inmate at the prison near Lyon where she teaches drama. This is not the first time this has happened. Abel (Louis Garrel, deploying his full repertoire of weary eye-rolls and shrugs) is determined to protect his mother from her own bad judgment. He ineptly stalks her newly released husband Michel (Roschdy Zem), cheered on by his best friend and colleague at the local aquarium, Clémance (*Portrait of a Lady on Fire*’s Noémie Merlant). Unexpectedly, he finds himself charmed by the charismatic Michel, despite his initial reservations. Soon, the neurotic, twitchy Abel finds himself rubbing shoulders with hardened ex-cons, some of whom are not as reformed as they claim to be. The film (which Garrel directs as well as stars in) gathers a madcap momentum, in the way that really bad life choices are apt to do.”

Wendy Ide, *The Observer*, 27 August 2023

“On the animated *Rocky and Bullwinkle* show of the 1960s, its lead characters once lampooned Marlon Brando by going on about what they called his “ultry-sultry” sex appeal. The first time I saw Louis Garrel on screen was in Bertolucci’s 2003 *The Dreamers*, in which he played one-third of a partially incestuous menage-a-trois enacted in a cinema-crazy Paris dreaming headlong into May ’68. A heady film in which the then-20-year-old Garrel, with his jet-black hair, broad shoulders, and blocky Romanesque facial features, never turned off the smolder. I’ve thought of him as “ultry-sultry” ever since.

There’s more to him than looks—there’s lineage. He’s the grandson of the remarkable French actor Maurice Garrel—check him out burning a hole through the screen in Arnaud Desplechin’s 2004 *Kings and Queen*—and the son of indefatigable, more often-than-not inspired director (and sometimes actor) Philippe Garrel, who’s got more than a few minor-key masterpieces to his credit, several of them starring his kids—Louis of course, and also his sisters Esther, and, more lately, Lena.

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Now approaching 40, Louis has tamped down the ultry-sultry vibe and worked on his directing chops. His third feature, *The Innocent*, is an often-disarming story that sees him communicating with a voice that seems more interested in reaching an entertainment-hungry audience than his father's often austere and dour pictures tend to be.

At heart, this is a story of filial devotions going above and beyond. Sylvie (Anouk Grinberg) is a lively middle-aged woman who teaches acting at a prison outside Paris. She's fallen hard for a convicted thief, Michel (Roschdy Zem), the most talented student in her class. It never occurs to her that his acting skill might make him a good liar. Sylvie's adult son Abel (Garrel) is very skeptical of this relationship but throws in his support when the newlyweds, with Michel now out on parole, open a flower shop together.

Abel is a young widower who is a tour guide at an aquarium, and his best friend—who was also the best friend of his departed wife—Clémence (Noémie Merlant), who works there as well, is a bit of a hellion (socially and sexually) who encourages Abel to lighten up about Michel. But Abel's doubts are justified. The flower shop has been “rented” on unusual terms, to say the least, and Michel has to pull a heist to maintain the status quo. Or so he tells Abel, who he enlists as a reluctant accomplice. When Abel confides to Clémence about what's up, she hilariously demands to get in on the crime. Their job—to distract a truck driver at a diner while Michel and his accomplice swipe a bunch of caviar from the rig—sees them acting out against each other with a little more reality than they'd bargained for.

While Garrel the director is guilty of an occasional coy or cute overreach, he keeps the story bouncy (he wrote the screenplay with Tanguy Viel and Naïla Guiguet) and is exceptional with the characterizations. He underplays somber and hapless as the loving son, while Merlant, known for intense work in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and *TÁR*, is possessed here by screwball-comedy energy that makes her character a superb “opposites attract” foil for Abel, among other things. As it happens, veteran actors Zem and Grinberg have worked for Louis' dad in the past. Family connection aside, they're perfect in their respective roles, giving performances that feel wholly lived-in. “*The Innocent*” is quirky, touching, and well-played fun.”

Glenn Kenny, *RogerEbert.com*, March 3, 2023

“Thespians and thieves have often pooled their resources in movies, notably in the work of Woody Allen. Since acting is basically a form of lying, goes the joke, actors dine at the same Runyon-esque table as people who nick stuff, and

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this French comedy offers a new story of a crim who needs some muscle from the theatrical arts.

Sylvie (Anouk Grinberg) is an actor at a time of life when she wants to quit the stage and settle down with a charming, burly convict called Michel (Roschdy Zem), whom she met when giving an acting class at the local Lyon slammer. She dotes on him to the point of marrying him in jail and setting up a flower shop with him on his release – but not to the point of letting him go back to his bent old ways, which would be a deal-breaker for her.

Predictably, though, Michel is soon consulting cauliflower-faced associates who might just know of some pricey Iranian caviar that might just be loose at the back of a truck.

Grinberg and Zem make an utterly engaging duo and you expect the film to be built around their fragile mutual devotion. The bubbly, half-litre-sized Grinberg – in the sort of role that Barbara Windsor took in real life – has an enigmatic face that always seems to be playing the opposite of what she’s feeling, both adoring and quick not to forgive.

Yet a decision is made to broaden the film’s demographic by way of two younger characters – Sylvie’s grouchy son Abel (Louis Garrel) and his somewhat wacky “best friend” Clémence, played by Noémie Merlant. (Garrel was in Bertolucci’s *The Dreamers* and Greta Gerwig’s *Little Women*; Merlant was in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* and played Cate Blanchett’s put-upon assistant in *Tár*.)

It’s these two, plus Zem, who do the heavy plot lifting at the heart of *The Innocent*. For reasons that don’t make complete sense, the gormless youngsters are drawn into Michel’s caviar caper, for which he – the old lag with the acting skills – has to tutor them in treading the boards to create a diversion during a heist.

All four of the leads are top performers in prime form, yet it’s a shame Grinberg’s moralistic mum has to be sidelined from the knavery. She doesn’t go without a fight though, notably in a scene when she furiously yanks her annoying son back and forth by the hair like she’s sifting flour.

Garrel also has directing and co-writing duties on the film. It’s his fourth feature at the helm and this is a handsome package with slicing dialogue and a Scorsesean camera in fizzy, beautifully played dialogue scenes. But the action sequences are few and a bit muddled, and the dividing of our attention between the two couples means there’s no central comedy engine to create especially funny set-pieces.

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The film manages to be stylish and sluggish, snappy and choppy all at once. To fall in love you have to be a good actor, it seems to be telling us, yet you also have to steal hearts and this is a movie that doesn't quite pull that scam off."

James Saynor, *The Arts Desk*, August 24, 2023

"While this French romp is both engaging and entertaining, its pacing feels a bit on the frantic side, as it playfully combines romantic comedy, heist caper and crime thriller elements. Actor-filmmaker Louis Garrel inventively packs the screen with chatty characters, slapstick silliness and tense action, and he also pulls a range of story strands in often surprising directions. So watching it feels like taking a rather wild ride.

In Lyon, Abel (Garrel) can't help but become worried when his oft-married diva mother Sylvie (Grinberg) marries ex-convict Michel (Zem), quits acting and opens a flower shop. Abel begins spying on Michel, convinced that he's up to something nefarious. He shares his concerns with his colleague Clemence (Merleant), who was his late wife's best friend. And as they snoop around, they discover that Michel has been coerced into a heist by his old pal Jean-Paul (Pautot). Soon, Abel and Clemence are involved as well. And of course nothing goes quite as anyone intended it to.

Connections between the four central characters are enjoyably messy, complicated by each person's personal issues. It's clear that Abel has been too preoccupied to notice a strong mutual attraction he shares with Clemence, so where that heads is unsurprising. And there's never a question that Michel is a good guy, despite his lingering connections to a criminal underworld. Instead, the writing and direction infuse the action scenes with comedy beats, so nothing gets too nasty or threatening. But there's a nice edge to the mayhem that holds the interest.

Garrel is a likeable protagonist, the innocent guy pulled in various directions by his rather naive assumptions about everyone around him. His general state of panic feels both realistic and ridiculous, and is also very easy for the viewer to identify with. He has terrific chemistry with the sparky, bracingly witty Merleant. And he's a great foil for the riotously prickly Grinberg. She creates a sweet and sexy connection with Zem, who brings the film some calm gravitas as the smart, thoughtful Michel.

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As the plot embraces its more farcical elements, the narrative's strong momentum carries it through a few rather jarring tonal shifts. And in the end, this becomes a charming tale about a group of people who learn to balance their own feelings with the needs of the others around them. So the story packs a few emotional punches as it heads to a conclusion that's both satisfying and perhaps a bit more complex than expected.”

Rich Cline, *Shadows on the Wall*, August 19, 2023