

FILM

## Near queer

**A Frenchman pretends to be gay in *The Closet*, while Brando pretends to be straight in *The Score***

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

It would be easy to dismiss the French film *The Closet* as yet another casualty of the global-entertainment-conglomerate era in which too many imported films boast a peculiar absence of any of the depth or substance for which U.S. filmgoers supposedly turn to international cinema in the first place. But it would be more perceptive to note the fine but important line dividing a comedy like this from its closest U.S. equivalents, *Mrs. Doubtfire* and *In & Out*. This isn't an "art" film by any means, but the relative sociopolitical sophistication that sets much of European culture apart from ours is apparent in the details of its execution.

Like any comedy, *The Closet* has a right to as crazy/dumb/clichéd a premise as its creators like, as long as it's a path to hilarity. In this case, middle-aged divorcé Francois (Daniel Auteuil), who works as an accountant at a rubber factory known for manufacturing, well, rubbers, is in danger of losing his job because he's so frankly boring that his bosses and co-workers find his lack of dynamism an unemployable trait.

But his neighbor Belone (Michel Aumont) helps him out by devising a brilliant plan: Francois should "come out of the closet" (a closet he was never in) as a gay man, thus lending himself some instant cred as an exciting, with-it kind of guy with an alternative, definitively interesting lifestyle. Belone even offers to digitally insert Francois' head into a photo of young men cavorting at a gay bar (Francois' head winds up attached to a body wearing nothing more than leather chaps) and send it in to his company anonymously.

After all, what modern-day French corporation—a condom manufacturer, no less—would risk the wrath of the gay community by even appearing to validate a blackmailer's attempt to

jeopardize the reputation of one of its employees merely by asserting he's gay?

The plan works a little too perfectly. Not only does Francois keep his job, he also is asked to ride the company's condom float in Paris' Gay Pride parade, which he does, only to be seen on television by his estranged teen-age son. The kid instantly takes a liking to his new "cool" dad, who he assumes now is liberated enough to be fine with his pot smoking.

Meanwhile, the company's resident macho homophobe (Gerard Depardieu), threatened with the loss of his own job if he treats Francois with anything but deference, overcompensates, purchasing gifts for him, asking him to lunch and eventually developing a disturbingly authentic interest in him.

The million-and-one crises caused by Francois' fake homosexuality aren't all tied into a neat little bundle at the end, but the film does take the smart view that the excitement, novelty and controversy surrounding the issue are meaningless. Francois makes no attempt to



Daniel Auteuil

"play gay," remaining his average, mild-mannered self, and there's a bit of sharp social satire as people in his milieu react and overreact to what they perceive him to be.

The film, written and directed by Francis Veber (*The Dinner Game*), lacks the after-school special moralizing we tend to get in those admirable-on-paper but generally tiresome mainstream films still intent on presenting the acceptance of homosexuality as a new, progressive litmus test of enlightenment. Instead, *The Closet* is what a summer movie should be: a relaxed, breezy, quite amusing, not

unintelligent trifle that, like cotton candy, melts away to nothing but does offer sweet, light enjoyment for as long as it's on the tongue.

*The Score* is sort of what Francois would be if he were a film. Every bit of national media attention given to this summer blockbuster pointedly has mentioned that Marlon Brando's character, a suave old crime boss who sets up a heist involving rival thieves Robert De Niro and Edward Norton, is gay.

In fact, the actor reportedly fought with director Frank Oz over the character's depiction; a story in *Time* described the portrayal as "Barbara Bush doing her best Truman Capote impersonation." Surprisingly, then, the finished product seems completely devoid of any inference of homosexuality on Brando's part, putting the film's queer audience (and this reviewer) in the awkward position, shared by Francois' bosses and colleagues in *The Closet*, of reacting to an impression nobody would have had if the bug hadn't been put in our ears by an external source.

As it stands, one looks for clues to the character's notorious homosexuality but finds only that Brando displays a strange, strangulated, lisping voice not unusual for him (the man always has been "queer" in the traditional sense of the word, which is to say "odd") and a dandy-ish wardrobe that wouldn't have been out of place on Don Corleone. In fact, the only really perceptible difference between this character and his famous *Godfather* role is that this wizened criminal is older, nicer, less serious and doesn't have a Family. Some editor must have one hell of a party reel of outtakes!

You needn't avoid *The Score* because of all the baseless scuttlebutt, however; the film is as benign and humorous in its own way as *Boufing*, Oz's last project, was. Norton and De Niro are ace actors, the heist action is fun to watch and frequently surprising and suspenseful, and despite the heightened expectations for a preening, sashaying Brando, his performance is rather entertainingly irascible, maybe even verging on the—oh, I don't know—bitchy, perhaps? **JM**

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