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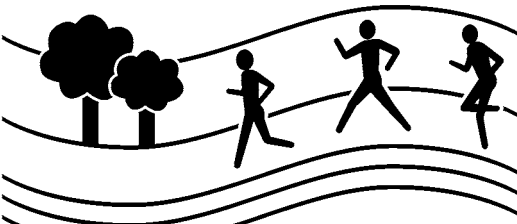
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movies BY MOLLY TEMPLETON



Daniel Auteuil and Kristin Scott Thomas in *The Valet*

The Double Life of François Pignon

High comedy floats above pratfalls and pitfalls

THE VALET: Written and directed by Francis Veber. Cinematography, Robert Fraisse. Music, Alexandre Desplat. Starring Gad Elmaleh, Alice Taglioni, Daniel Auteuil, Kristin Scott Thomas and Virginie Ledoyen. Sony Pictures Classics, 2007. PG-13. 85 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

Kristin Scott Thomas keeps turning up in the oddest places. Last fall, it was in the half-baked, barely funny British comedy *Serial Mum*; now, she appears in *The Valet*, playing with crisp perfection the wife of a French billionaire whose wandering eye has landed him in hot water. Scott Thomas, though her role is small, is a steely, elegant thread throughout *The Valet*, the latest in a line of films by writer-director Francis Veber (*The Closet*, *The Dinner Game*) to focus on a fellow named François Pignon.

Here, François (Gad Elmaleh, an everyman in the Nicolas Cage vein) is the eponymous valet who finds himself caught up a romantic battle among Scott Thomas's Christine; her husband, Pierre (Daniel Auteuil of *Caché*); and her husband's mistress, Elena (Alice Taglioni), a stunning blonde supermodel. Poor François, recently turned down by his bookstore-owning crush Émilie (Virginie Ledoyen), finds himself in the middle of cross upon doublecross as Pierre tries to convince Christine that Elena, with whom he was photographed on the street, is actually dating François, who just happened to also be in the photo. But this story doesn't just belong to the men; both Christine and Elena are too sharp to be played by neurotic, stressed-out Pierre (who looks amusingly like a French Michael Douglas, adding another layer of humor to the character's dalliance with a much younger woman).

Veber's characters are cheerily over the top, from François' goofy roommate, Richard (Dany Boon), to sympathetic, warmhearted Elena, who's nonetheless not above turning Pierre's predicament to her own advantage. But that's part of the charm of this swift-moving farce, in which

everyone, rich or poor, ordinary or beautiful, has the same problem: wanting something they haven't got (though loaded, greedy Pierre, who's got more than he can handle, doesn't exactly elicit sympathy). Alexandre Desplat's score — a thing of perception and perfectly complementary

The Valet has a peculiar charm that comes in part from being able to see exactly where the film *could* have gone horribly wrong.

themes — underlines the film's equal-opportunity playfulness with its takes on different musical styles, including faux-techno for an elaborate fashion show and a Bond-esque theme for Christine and her sharp-eyed deflections of her husband's lame excuses.

The Valet has a peculiar charm that comes in part from being able to see exactly where the film *could* have gone horribly wrong. It could have thrown in an awkward second love triangle or made beautiful, smart Elena too good to be true; it could have put too much effort into explaining things or turned into an eye-rolling rich-people-have-problems-too-fable. As is, the worst thing *The Valet* does is come screeching to a halt with a closing scene that, while appropriate, relies sloppily on a *deus ex drag queen* — er, sorry, *machina*. The *Los Angeles Times* review of the film mentions that the Farrelly brothers have bought the remake rights; see it now, while it retains a classic, elevated sense of humor, before you see that inevitably Americanized version.

EW