

François (Daniel Auteuil) and Catherine (Julie Gayet) in *My Best Friend*



Friendship, En Français

Grown men stumbling towards *fraternité*

MY BEST FRIEND: Directed by Patrice Leconte. Original story by Olivier Dazat. Screenplay adaptation by Jérôme Tonnerre and Patrice Leconte. Cinematography, Jean-Marie Dreujou. Music, Xavier Demerliac. Starring Daniel Auteuil, Dany Boon, Julie Gayet and Julie Durand. IFC Films, 2007. PG-13. 94 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

My Best Friend marks the third time this year I've seen a light-hearted though occasionally painful-to-watch French comedy in which a well-off person (or several) is awakened to the errors of his, her or their ways by associating with an ordinary, just-like-you-and-me character. In *Avenue Montaigne*, a naïve, sweet country girl got through to warm the hearts of the upper-crusties; in *The Valet*, the unassuming valet found himself drawn into the schemes of the rich and lovelorn. In *My Best Friend*, we meet François (Daniel Auteuil, who, if you squint, bears more than a passing resemblance to Michael Douglas), a gallery co-owner who's been forced to a simple realization: He doesn't have any friends. When his partner in the gallery bets him that he can't introduce her to a best friend within 10 days, François goes into businesslike overdrive, hunting down acquaintances and childhood friends, hopelessly and haplessly feeling them out to see if they might be his bosom buddies.

They aren't. François exists in an interesting cinematic world, both rarified and understandable. He buys an ancient vase on a whim for \$200,000, but when Catherine (Julie Gayet) coldly ribs him about his friendless state, he becomes just another lonely man in a lot of debt. François' beautiful, tastefully decorated apartment is hollowly oversized, dwarfing his distant daughter, Louise (Julie Durand); his sweet girlfriend stops by now and then but can't seem to hold François' attention, and you see why he has an (unseen) ex-wife. And the emptiness in François' life that takes the shape of a best

friend? On the other side of that gap is Bruno (Dany Boon, who was also in *The Valet*).

Bruno, whose face was built to break into a cheery grin — when he frowns, it seems unnatural — drives a taxi into which a terse François climbs several times in the span of a few days. Bruno's obsessed with facts and with getting on a quiz show someday, and he likes to tell his passengers all kinds of things about France. When François sees Bruno instantly getting on with the savoyards (porters; yes, Bruno will explain why they're called that) and a woman with a dachshund, he understands that the taxi driver grasps something about life that's utterly beyond François, for whom friendship is basically a transaction for some kind of gain.

But making friends as an adult, especially if you've no practice at it, is rarely easy. Bruno gamely tells François what he should try, and François practices, with embarrassing, predictable results. He's hopeless. Those practice sessions, though, are hardly the point: François has already met his best friend. He just doesn't know it yet.

Though *My Best Friend* takes some time to get moving and to hit its stride in the balance between sweetness and slapstick, there's a lovely tenderness in watching Bruno and François, each man with his troubles and his history, trying to connect. It's almost a romantic comedy — minus the romance and with a careful spin on the comedy: The film never overreaches or goes for too obvious a joke, instead letting François' growing desperation war with his refined sensibilities in a manner that skirts humiliation comedy yet stays safely on this side of it. François becomes a sympathetic character almost in spite of himself, while Bruno, in unexpected ways, becomes something like a leading man. Friendship is a strange thing, hard to predict, hard to define — as François learns — but *My Best Friend* does a lovely job of exploring some of its possibilities.

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